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Supervision as Widening the Horizons

Elizabeth Liebert

"We see what we can see," says one member of a supervision group.
"No, we see what we want to see," responds another.

Each of these statements could provoke a heated discussion on its meaning and validity. I will not try to unpack these sentences. Instead, I simply wish to use them as pointers to my thesis: There is so much more we could "see" in spiritual direction than we often recognize. There are so many levels and complexities, so much richness in the ways God's own self is revealed to us. How can we widen the horizons of our spiritual direction? How can we teach to these new horizons? How can we nurture growth in this ability to see past the obvious?

And whose horizons are at issue? Those seekers who come for spiritual direction, certainly. How we see God, where we perceive God to be present and active, absent or silent, limits our horizons. They are limited by our internalized images of holiness, a weak connection between our prayer and our action, limited conceptions of prayer, or an inability to move from an injunction to pray to the actual practice of prayer. I am always saddened when a directee says: "I didn't realize that (walking in nature, getting swept up in beautiful music or art, attending lovingly to a dying relative or helpless infant, trying to reach each child in a crowded classroom, struggling to change discriminatory laws, and on and on) could be part of my prayer! I've been doing that all my life, and I always thought I was not a prayerful person." Or a student, after learning some of the richness of the Christian tradition, says, sometimes angrily and sometimes wistfully: "How come I never heard this before? I was raised in the church, and this is the first time

I have heard it!" Or an adult exclaims (as a woman in a class for catechists once did): "Oh, there *is* something important going on in the Bible. I can't just leave it sit on the coffee table, can I?"

Whose horizons? The directors who serve as companions to seekers, certainly. Directors have frequently been schooled to see God in the "spiritual" things of formal prayer, be it private or corporate, and in the silence of our inner "closets." We may secretly believe that real contemplatives march through the rooms of Teresa's interior castle and the stages of John's dark night. They usually live in cloisters or monasteries, or at least they are ordained. The rest of us, we may believe, just dabble in holiness or play at sanctity, because we are too busy earning a living to afford the leisure of contemplative silence.

Whose horizons? Those who accompany spiritual directors in their ministry—supervisors—yes, us, too. Our horizons may also be too small, captured as they may have been by psychological assumptions and the clinical origin of our supervisory model. We look for slips and resistances, we seek to set directors free of their inner blocks to hearing their directees—good work, certainly—but in the process, we may still miss the breadth and depth of the Mystery of God in encounters between the director and the directee or in the directee's own encounter with God. If we really were to experience the Mystery of God, Annie Dillard warns us to be prepared:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.¹

Seekers, directors, and supervisors all suffer from limited vision, and we all too frequently fail to recognize that we are on holy ground, all the time. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke voices our dilemma as he addresses "neighbor God":

...
 Between us there is but a narrow wall,
 and by sheer chance; for it would take
 merely a call from your lips or from mine
 to break it down,
 and that without a sound.

The wall is builded of your images.
They stand before you hiding you like names . . .²

We hold so many deeply held, often unexamined assumptions building images that surround us like names:

- Spiritual life is interior life.
- One's spiritual life is private and personal.
- Psychology can free us from narrow and dogmatic views of God and the spiritual life.
- Moral life is about sexuality, not about economics or politics.
- Prayer is talking to God.
- My church is the true church.
- Body is opposed to spirit; body holds our spirits captive.
- Heaven is "up" and "after we die."
- God is in heaven.
- God is Father.
- Human nature must be tamed to be spiritual.
- God's will is ultimately inscrutable.
- Theology and science talk about mutually exclusive worlds.
- Church is for spiritual life and the world is for everything else.

This list could go on and on. We came by such assumptions quite innocently and "naturally." We grew up in the assumptive worlds that made one or several of our beliefs self-evident. We all have sets of such assumptions that simultaneously free us and continue to limit how we expect to experience God. Our ongoing challenge, whether as seekers, directors of seekers, or companions to directors, is twofold: to recognize the kernel of truth in each of these assumptions, but also to become free of the limits to imagination that they set for us, usually unconsciously. Our task in widening our horizons is to clear out some of the debris of unexamined assumptions and put on crash helmets.

Two Invitations to Expand Our Horizons

If we are helped to see the problem by poets, we are helped to see the solution by a spiritual master, Ignatius of Loyola, and a theologian, Karl Rahner. In the *Contemplation to Attain Love* at the conclusion of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius invites the loved sinner, who has accompanied Jesus through death and into resurrection, to a life of gratitude and to labor as God labors. For this person, the Mystery of God suffuses all:

I will ponder with deep affection how much God Our Lord has done for me, and how much [God] has given me of what [God] possesses, and consequently how [God], the same Lord, desires to give me even [God's] very self, in accordance with [God's] divine design. . . .

I will consider how God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth, that is, acts as one who is laboring. For example, [God] is working in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, and all the rest. . . .

I will ask for what I desire, for interior knowledge of all the great good I have received, in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, I may become able to love and serve [t]his Divine Majesty in all things.³

Simply put, our call is to experience God's presence in and through God's work, to give thanks, and to join God in the completion of this work. Since all of creation is God's work, it is possible to meet God in any part of creation: in the natural world, in our neighbor, in culture, in the depths of our own hearts.

Karl Rahner clothed this profoundly world-oriented and life-affirming spirituality with theological and philosophical language for today.⁴ Echoing Ignatius, Rahner spoke of God as the one who continually gives of God's own self, so much so that we exist in a world of grace.⁵ We are "surrounded by a God who, like a horizon is ever receding and therefore Absolute Mystery, but, as revealed by Jesus, is ever drawing near to us in gracious self-giving."⁶ The experience of God, therefore, is not just one experience among many; it is the radical essence of every spiritual and personal experience. In fact, there exists an element of the ineffable in the concrete experience of our everyday life.⁷ For our part, human beings are uniquely transcendent, that is to say, spiritual, beings. We are aware of more than the time and space that limit us; we reach out for the truth of ourselves and of God. Whether or not we have the language for our quest, all humans are characterized by this pull toward understanding ourselves in the light of the divine. And our uniquely human response is to freely love another person. Rahner was so convinced of this dynamic exchange between divine creator and human creature that he insisted that the love of God and the love of neighbor are but two names for the same reality. That is, the experience of God is simultaneously the experience of the depths of oneself and of the radical otherness of one's neighbor. This "simultaneity" provides directors and supervisors with one of their most useful insights, as we shall see.

Rahner also pondered the notion of human experiencing. He noted that our experience of God is primary and universal, and prior to any subsequent attempt to conceptualize it, it is frequently diffuse and unthematic. Yet we humans can reflect on our experience, stand back and look at it, think about it, categorize it, make decisions about it. Based upon this Rahnerian insight, we could say that we become aware of our experience through several degrees of explicitness, from the

vague, almost somatic awareness (nonthematic), to more reflective, affective-laden, and imaginative awareness, to logically explicit interpretive awareness. Our consciousness of what is happening to us at a given moment may be very diffuse and inarticulate (nonthematic); it may be captured in an emotionally powerful dream or an image (affective-imaginative); or, upon attending to it, we may describe it logically, develop propositions, and make some decisions with respect to it (interpretive). These variations in the explicitness in our attending to experience flow into each other organically and in no particular order, and they may even exist simultaneously—a proposition may also contain an image that arouses strong feelings and register in one's body with a certain felt sense. This description of our awareness of our experience offers spiritual directors and supervisors another key insight.

The Role of Supervision

In light of these realities, we can now frame an understanding of supervision that takes them into account. Supervision is a ministry in which a relatively more experienced spiritual director assists another spiritual director to grow in self-awareness, inner freedom, and the ability to help others enter into the experience of God's presence and to respond in gratitude to the call that arises from that encounter.⁸ Chief among the goals of supervision, however, is attending to the experience of the mystery of God, as God chooses to reveal God's own self, in three theaters: the conversation between the supervisor and director, the conversation between the director and directee, and the directee's life. The primary goal of both spiritual direction and supervision is the awareness of and reflection on Holy Mystery. William Creed asserts: "[S]piritual direction involves skills, but all the effort of listening and responding, noticing the verbal and non-verbal movements of the directee, do not make a good spiritual director. Directors need to know those skills, but the key is the Mystery where the divine and the human kiss."⁹

Supervision, then, though it may (and frequently does) touch on matters of skill, or the directors' own hidden blocks, does so primarily in service to this primary end, recognizing and responding to the Holy Mystery we Christians call God.

So far, so good. The problem, however, is in attending to the experience of God. Too little of our experience appears to be of God, and therefore "spiritual"; too much of it not of God, and therefore "nonspiritual." The Center for Spirituality and Justice in the Bronx offers a case in point. Over and over again, the staff found their commitment to social spirituality and the social dimension of sin getting lost as their interns slipped into their "spiritual director personas." Could this seemingly intractable dichotomy be bridged? In a now-classic essay, Elinor Shea describes their tentative steps to construct a more adequate model

for integrating the classical teaching on prayer and spiritual direction with their commitment to social justice.¹⁰

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the Center of Concern had begun to study the relationship between "social consciousness" and Ignatian spirituality. The work of Peter Henriot and Thomas Clarke, grounded in Karl Rahner's theological anthropology, gave the staff at the Center for Spirituality and Justice the clue they were searching for:

[I]t is only possible to speak of the reality of the human person today by taking into full account the three dimensions of human existence: the *individual*, the *interpersonal* and the *public*. These are not three separate and distinct dimensions so much as three moments in our perception of a single reality, or three interrelated interpenetrated aspects. Thus the identity of the human person is inadequately situated outside a consideration of all three dimensions simultaneously.¹¹

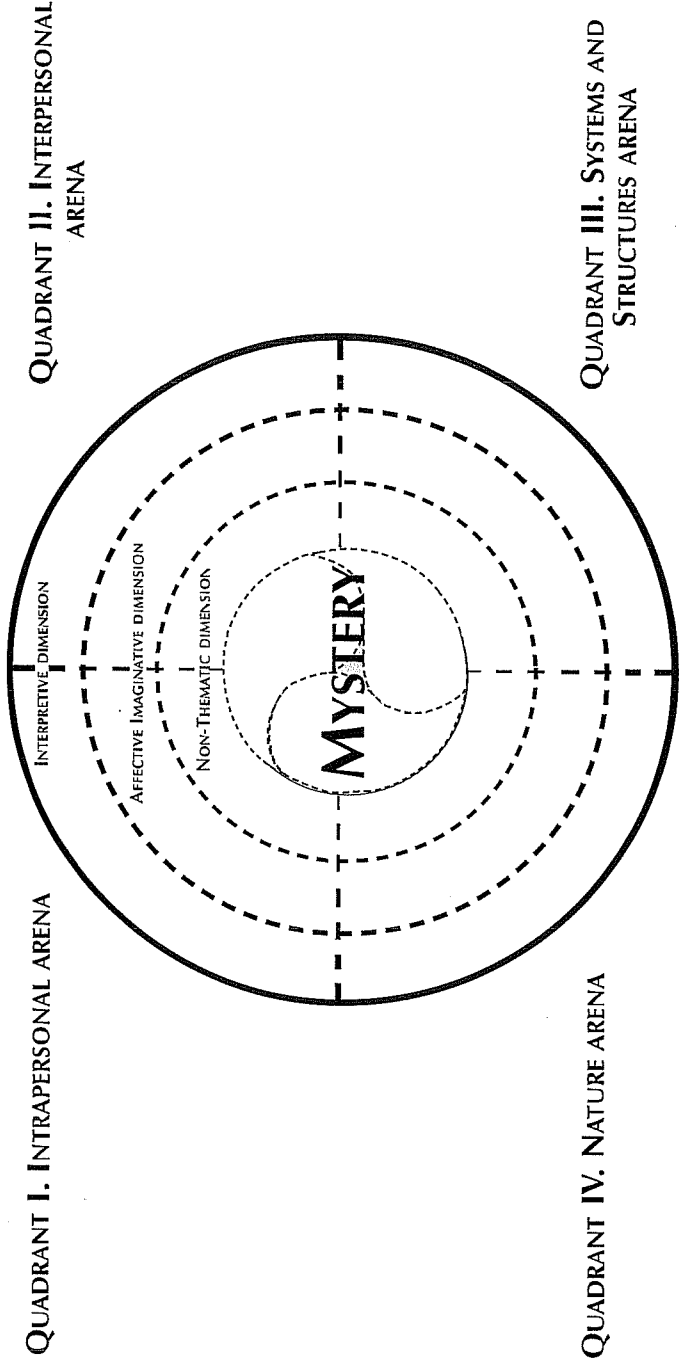
Every human person experiences himself or herself in this multidimensioned way, but it is the nature of human consciousness to attend to only one at a time, letting the others recede from attention. Thus it is possible to be unaware of or inattentive to whole aspects of one's experience. The staff at the Center of Concern began to wonder whether the problem of the division between the "spiritual" and the "secular" was at least partly due to the fact that the spiritual director's perspective was confined largely to one *arena* of human experience, namely, intrapersonal. When the notion of religious experience is broadened to include the interpersonal and the social and structural, and all arenas are seen as the theater of the experience of the mystery of God, the spiritual director's task is immensely widened.

The Experience Circle as a Tool for Widening Our Horizons

Thus began a theoretical perspective expressed in a tool we have come to call the Experience Circle. Rather soon, in several parts of the country, a fourth arena was added to the conception of human experience, called, variously, Nature, Environment, and Eco-environment.¹² The rectangular chart developed by the Center for Spirituality and Justice gave way to a circle, which provided a more adequate symbol of the unity of experience and also more readily suggested the fluidity, interconnectivity, and simultaneity than did blocked-off columns and rows.

The Experience Circle¹³ attempts to overlay two theoretical foci in one visual: (1) an understanding of the *quadratic* nature of human experience (experience is simultaneously interior/intrapersonal, interpersonal, systemic/structural, and environmental/natural) with (2) the varying degrees of explicitness in

THE EXPERIENCE CIRCLE



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Quadrants represent: I. Literal Arenas of Human Experience of God; 2. Angles of Vision, Moments in Perception. Rings represent dimensions of human awareness: Non-Thematic, Affective Imaginative, and Interpretive. Center Circle represents Mystery: Ineffable Touch of the Holy, Experienced in Encounters with God, Self, Nature.

the perception of that experience (we attend affectively, interpretively, and/or nonthematically to our experience). The linchpin is *simultaneity*. All of the arenas of experience occur simultaneously, though our reflection process on our experience develops (or becomes more faint) through the various dimensions over time. Furthermore, the simultaneity in human experiencing is set against the primary notion of simultaneity between the creator and creature as Rahner understood it: An experience of depth of self or the radical otherness of one's neighbor is simultaneously an experience of God. We now have the core of a theory of the human experience of the divine that can be operationalized by spiritual directors and their supervisors.

The shaded area at the center of the diagram,¹⁴ labeled "Mystery," is meant to suggest the unitive experience between the creator and creation that occurs at the moment of knowing oneself, one's God, and one's entire life context in a mysteriously profound, more enlarged way. It is divided into three mutually interlocking sections representing God, Self, and Nature.¹⁵ The dashed lines indicate that these three actors influence one another. But they do not "capture" each other, and none is collapsed into another. Rather, they engage in a trinitarian dance of mutual interdependence and influence. Placing the Mystery at the center graphically represents the "location" of Holy Mystery in the depth of reality, at the center of our being, and as the "ground" of our experience. Expressing the Holy Mystery as three mutually interdependent actors, God, self, and nature, illustrates Rahner's insight that the experience of God is simultaneously the experience of self and the experience of neighbor—which now includes all of nature.

The fourfold dimensionality of human experience is expressed by the four quadrants of the circle, which focus on the various aspects of experience:

- The intrapersonal arena (top left) focuses on the experience of self as distinguished from other people. It attends primarily to interior dynamics.
- The interpersonal arena (moving clockwise) focuses on the experience of self with other people as individuals. It focuses on the relationships between and among people in face-to-face groups.
- The systems and structures arena focuses on the self-in-systems. It deals with those formal sets of rules, regulations, and relationships (systems or structures) that exist consciously and unconsciously and serve to partially constrain the individual actors. The focus of that arena rests more on the roles themselves and relationships among roles than on the individuals who fill the roles.
- The arena of nature focuses upon the self as continuous with and discontinuous from the whole universe. It draws attention to the interdependence among all the creatures in the universe and to the reciprocal influence between the natural world and the individual person.

Several caveats and illustrations are in order. First, the arenas are not hard and fast realities into which we fix our experiences. Rather, they are simply heuristic devices that depend on perspective and emphasis. For example, you are a director for Peter. He talks lately about being extremely worried about his spouse, Marta, who seems more and more depressed as winter comes on. They struggle to communicate. Their oldest child, Toby, is having more trouble than usual in school, and his teacher has called several times asking for a conference, adding to your directee's anxiety. You and Peter could begin to "open up" Peter's experience via a number of avenues. You could approach it primarily as a largely intrapersonal experience, attending to the worry that Peter has for Marta and his concern for Toby. By association, other sources of anxiety could flow naturally from this discussion, and you invite God to be with Peter in this time of anxiety. Or you could just as easily attend to the interpersonal dimension, focusing on the change in the relationship between Peter and Marta, holding this relationship before the light of God's love. Or the main attention could center on the family as a system of spouses and children—that is, the roles that the individuals play in a particular family structure. Your conversation could, quite plausibly, move toward how God might be calling Peter to respond in his role as husband and father. You could begin by noticing that the season of the year is weighing heavily on the situation. You might wonder about its role in the heaviness in the directee (intrapersonal), in the communication problem between the spouses (interpersonal), or on the family structure (the kids bickering and fighting during long afternoons cooped up indoors during inclement weather). Perhaps the leaden skies of December serve as a metaphor; perhaps the season is literally a "player" in this drama (nature). No avenue is "correct" to the exclusion of the others. The four arenas are potentially present in this single narration; Peter narrates a rich multidimensional experience.

Second, the boundaries among the quadrants are not to be seen as clear and distinct. It is quite possible, following the above example, to look at Peter and Marta as persons who are in an intimate relationship of marriage (interpersonal dimension), or to focus on Peter and Marta primarily in their roles as husband, wife, and parent (structural dimension). Both are valid, and either might be appropriate.

Third, and providing a corrector to its absence in so much spiritual literature, the body can be understood as present in all arenas, depending upon which aspect one desires to focus. The body is the ground and medium of our inner movements and affections (intrapersonal), we relate to other persons as body-selves (interpersonal), the body is a system itself and represents other systems (such as the Body of Christ), and the body and all that it is made of is shared with the rest of the universe (nature).

Fourth, language and imagery are often arena-specific. In our culture, what we think of as "spiritual" language is typically language of the intrapersonal or

interpersonal arenas. Language that describes the structural arena doesn't appear or feel spiritual; hence we have to learn to "hear" it as such, just as we have to learn to "see" the action of God, not merely in the persons within a structure, but in the structure itself. Language that describes experiences in nature is more readily perceived as spiritual, but the experience is often ruled "out of bounds" as somehow not Christian.

Finally, and of great significance for spiritual direction, the notion of simultaneity suggests that an experience of the Holy in one arena will "overflow" or "bleed into" all the other arenas of a single life. A new experience of freedom in one arena will have a reverberation in the other arenas, though it may be so subtle and nonthematic that it goes unnoticed. Spiritual directors who are aware of the notion of simultaneity are more apt to notice these "echoes," help bring them to light, and invite directees to deepen them through attending, naming, and responding.

In this light, we can understand spiritual direction to be a privileged relationship in which director and directee together "live into" the expectation that God is working in all arenas of the directee's life. Similarly, supervision is the ministry of assisting directors in this multifaceted attending to Holy Mystery as it appears both in their directees' lives and in their work as spiritual directors.

The concentric rings represent different degrees of explicitness in our receiving and processing experience. The ring immediately surrounding Mystery represents nonthematic awareness: Something registers somatically but is not yet specifically named, categorized as a certain kind of experience, or attended to in such a way that it reveals its richness. This immediate experience is as yet virtually unformulated and directed by our cognitive processes. Often these experiences are so subtle as to be barely evident to our consciousness, yet nonetheless they are truly present. Our deepest touches of the Holy often register nonthematically, as "sighs too deep for words," a "flood of newness," spontaneous upwellings of tears, or inexpressible attraction. Nonthematic experiences often invite a simple contemplative presence and awareness.

The second dimension, termed affective-imaginative, represents all the nonlinear and often nonverbal ways we experience and process: felt senses, intuitions, metaphors and images, colors, odors, fantasies, dreams, fables and myths, stories. The kinds of processing that flow from and nourish this dimension include art, music, dance, poetry, and other sorts of creative and evocative ways of opening up the multilayered possibilities inherent in affective, imaginative, largely nondiscursive awareness.

The third dimension represents our conscious reflection and interpretation. It is the province of the rational and the logical, of ideas, definitions, conceptual insights, and analysis. Because it depends heavily on the verbal, it can be relatively more communicable through shared language. Theological reflection and discursive meditation reside in this dimension.

How are these dimensions related to each other? The nonthematic dimension, whether or not attended to, underlies all experience. In a sense, it is the foundation on which the other two dimensions are built. Likewise, the affective-imaginative dimension underlies the interpretive dimension, because thoughts have an affective component that may or may not be in the thinker's awareness but that provides the impetus to act.

Because of the propensity to focus our attention on one dimension at a time, it is relatively easy to overlook or undervalue the other two. A person on a "head trip" processes in the interpretive dimension without much attention to the affective or nonthematic aspects of the experience, but we want to encourage just such integration. "Impractical visionaries" or persons of "artistic temperament" can be invited to ground their heavily affective-imaginative experiences in a bit of logic and analysis. Persons who remain largely in the nonthematic dimension will be left without much language with which to assess and communicate their experiences, to relate them to the wider Christian story, or to engage in discernment about their demands, and directors will help the affective and interpretive dimensions to mature. To attend to our experience fully, in this view, is to range through all the dimensions of awareness, savoring and plumbing each.

It is not possible to portray everything we might want to say on a single graphic. For example, placing Mystery in the center could leave the impression that only the nonthematic dimension "drops into" the direct touch of God, and that the other two dimensions are only preparations for the real work of spiritual direction—which we then assume to be arriving at nonthematic direct presence to God. A direction session in which the directee "stays in her head" can be judged as somehow not as good as it should be, because the directee did not "drop down" into the direct experience of the Holy. Of course, we want to encourage just such immediate presence to Mystery (which is always God's gift, and does not appear through our direction skill or the directee's generosity!). But we should just as faithfully encourage theological reflection so that directees can connect their experience to the larger tradition and grow in their understanding of God. And both the person prone to live in the interpretive dimension and the person prone to desire the quiet, nonthematic resting of the first dimension can enrich their experiences by tapping into the huge store of energy held in the affective-reflective dimension.

Keeping this graphic in mind adds a second facet to the spiritual director's task—and, by extension, that of the supervisor: The spiritual director invites and assists the directee in moving through all dimensions of the experience, attending and relishing the fruit of each.

Spiritual Direction and Supervision in Light of the Experience Circle

With this background, the movement of the spiritual direction session can be seen as something like this:

- Director and directee together ask for the grace to attend to the Mystery of God and to respond to it.
- The directee narrates a portion of his or her experience, something that caught his or her attention in daily life, something that seemed significant in the directee's relationship with God.
- The director discerns where there seems to be the most potential for noticing the "trace of the finger of God" in the directee's narration and begins responding around this aspect of the directee's experience. Alternatively, the directee directs the conversation by asking to talk about something specific. In either case, the experience usually "shows up" clearly in one arena.
- The director, using first- and second-level contemplative listening,¹⁶ helps the directee expand the experience through the interpretive, affective, and nonthematic dimensions, moving back and forth as the conversation opens up. If God so chooses, the directee may enter again into a moment in which God touches the directee directly and immediately; if so, director and directee linger and relish this contemplative moment.
- They also attend to other arenas, wondering how God's life will show up there, believing that because of simultaneity, it will. (This portion may extend over several sessions.)
- As director and directee follow the thread of simultaneity leading to another arena of the directee's experience, they attend to all the dimensions of the directee's experience as manifested in this new arena.
- The director summarizes and invites the directee to respond to God's initiative. (Again, this process may extend over several sessions.)
- Director and directee celebrate God's grace, mercy, and presence during the direction session.

The supervision relationship, using this model, proceeds somewhat like this:

- Director and supervisor ask for the grace to attend to the Mystery of God and to respond to it.
- The director narrates a portion of his or her experience of direction, something that seemed significant in his or her relationship with the directee, a slip, a momentary inattention, a sense that there was something more that was missed, a moment of breakthrough for the directee or for the director, and so on.

- The supervisor may discern where there seems to be the most potential for noticing the “trace of the finger of God” in the director’s narration. But more typically, the one coming for supervision directs the conversation’s early stages by bringing a specific question and accompanying illustration from a particular spiritual direction session.
- Director and supervisor proceed, using first- and second-level contemplative listening, to expand the experience that the director wishes to unpack. They are looking for the finger of God in three theaters: in the life of the directee, in God’s work in the director as director, and in the present conversation between director and supervisor. Simultaneity suggests that the work of God in all three will be connected.
- Together, supervisor and spiritual director follow the thread of this first topic through the interpretive, affective, and nonthematic dimensions, moving back and forth as the conversation opens up. If God so chooses, the director may enter again into a moment in which God touches him or her directly and immediately; if so, supervisor and director linger and relish this contemplative moment just as the director and directee would relish a contemplative moment during the spiritual direction session.
- Director and supervisor attend to other arenas of the director’s life as they enter into the practice of spiritual direction, wondering how God’s life will show up there, believing, because of their trust in simultaneity, that it will. Supervision ranges far beyond the intrapsychic dynamics of the director and the interpersonal relationships of director-directee and director-supervisor. It can attend to the various roles being enacted (structural), to the setting and environment in which the direction or supervision takes place, to the influence of the natural world on the attentiveness of the director, to the director’s own prayer as a font for the spiritual direction relationship, and so on.
- As they discover the thread of simultaneity leading them to another arena, they repeat their attending to foster all the dimensions in the director’s reflection.
- They notice how this new insight carries over into this director’s work with other directees.
- The supervisor summarizes and invites a response to God’s invitation. They may “practice” how this new experience of freedom will show up in the director’s work with this directee and with others.
- They celebrate God’s grace, mercy, and presence during the supervision session.

The Model in Action

This section examines a critical incident in supervision.¹⁷ It begins with the spiritual direction session that the director is bringing to supervision and follows the example from the direction session into the supervision session. The goal is both to illumine the model and to clarify how it functions, as revealed through supervision of a spiritual direction session. The directee is Andrea; the director, Mary; and the supervisor, Art.

Andrea is a Presbyterian clergywoman who has been seeing her director, Mary, for about two years, since she graduated from seminary and moved to the area to become Associate Pastor for Christian Education and Spiritual Formation of a medium-size church. She felt welcomed by the church and loves the area, with its many options for outdoor activities and its culture. She is single and tends to spend a good deal of time engaged in ministry. She is slowly building a support system among other pastors, especially women in the interfaith clergy group. She is also beginning to build nonclergy friendships through her love of bicycling, which she does regularly on her days off.

The senior pastor was installed in her church eighteen years earlier and is well loved and respected by the entire congregation. The congregation has been unflinchingly gracious, as has the senior pastor—indeed, this is one of the qualities that drew her to this church. Consequently, it took more than a year for Andrea to notice that whenever she talked over her ideas and plans with the pastor, though they were met with characteristic graciousness, nothing ever seemed to come of them. Lately she has noticed a similar dynamic in her work with the Education Commission: Her ideas seem to go nowhere unless the commission members receive a nod from the senior pastor. In her last several spiritual direction sessions, Andrea has pinpointed and named her feelings of disappointment and frustration, as well as her annoyance that it took her so long to notice the pattern, covered as it is by graciousness on the part of the pastor and loyalty to the senior pastor on the part of the members of the Education Commission. She is aware that she will probably have to take more direct action but dreads “upsetting the apple cart.”

In her most recent session, Andrea begins by relaying the results of her prayer around the situation with her pastor, which has been a topic of conversation for the past several sessions. She reports that the overriding feeling that has emerged from her prayer is irritation that God has not softened the pastor’s gracious snowballing technique. “I think I’m going to have to bring it up directly, and I am afraid that when I do, the graciousness toward me will end. I think I’ve gotten a bit dependent on that graciousness,” she concludes. “That’s the main thing going on in my prayer, but I also want to tell you about a show I saw last night, because it really touched me and has stayed with me all day. It was one of the National Geographic programs, set in Africa. The photographer was following the migration of the wildebeests. The image that has stayed with me is of a cow and her

calf. They are moving along at a pace that the calf can manage, heading from where the water holes are drying up to new grazing ground where there is more water and grass. As they are crossing a mostly dry riverbed, the calf gets stuck in some mud. As it struggles, it sinks deeper. You see the cow calling to her calf to get it to come along. The next scene, though, is the one that really got to me. The camera looked past the struggling calf to the herd moving slowly out of sight in the distance, leaving the calf trapped in the mud. The photographer went back the next day to show the outcome. The calf was totally encased in hardened mud, dead. When I saw that, I burst into tears. I'm not sure exactly why, but it really got to me." (Tears well up, and one or two roll silently down her cheek.) "I don't know why I'm crying. It was just a show on TV. I didn't actually see it happen."

Mary remains quiet for a few moments, letting Andrea sit with her tears and feelings. "It just seems so incredibly sad," Andrea says after a few moments.

"You seem very sad even now as you remember."

"Yes, I am . . ." (pause)

"Is there another feeling under that one?" (pause)

"I don't know. The sadness is so strong." (pause)

"Maybe the calf represents something to you that you feel very strongly, very sad about." (pause)

"I think I am like the calf. I am sad that things with the church and Tom [the pastor] have turned out like this. So I am sad . . . and irritated. Yeah. Sad and mad together."

Mary and Andrea continue to attend to the feelings, trying to notice and bring to light all the different ones that are actually present in the moment. The list grows to include "boxed in," "ineffective," and "resistant."

Mary picks up on the last one, and Andrea responds. "Resistant. That doesn't seem quite like the other feelings. It's connected in my mind because I know I have to talk to Tom about the way things are going, and I really don't want to. I really have a hard time moving outside my 'nice girl' image. If I talk to Tom, I won't be a 'nice girl' Associate any longer. I think I am sad because I had secretly hoped for the perfect church. I am mad because it turned out not to be the perfect church. And I have this sinking feeling because I don't want to do what I suspect I am going to have to do if I want to move ahead."

"You really don't want to move outside of your 'nice girl' image? Talking to Tom means you are not a nice girl any longer?"

"Yeah. I have this thing. I hated being nagged by my mom to be perfect and nice all the time. I never did *anything* because I knew I would disappoint her. I learned how to be a nice girl. I've been doing it all my life."

"So you learned it early and practiced it often."

"Uh-huh."

"Sounds like this might be an area where you are not as free as you would like to be. Not as free as God wants you to be."

"Well, yeah. In my *head* I realize that the world won't end if I bring all this up with Tom, but somehow I don't believe it deep down."

"Let's just stop there for a minute. Sit for a minute and see if you can notice your deepest desire about this need to be good . . ." (pause)

After a couple minutes, Andrea starts to tear up again. "I think I was so sad because just like the calf, I am caught. But needing to be nice traps me. Just as stuck. I don't want to be just as dead."

"Maybe you could say that to God, what you want, right now." (pause)

After a couple more minutes, Andrea lets out a little chuckle. "I just got it! Wildebeest. Wild beast. There is a part of me that is like a wild beast trapped in this huge mud hole. So I want to break out of the mud and be more myself than I let myself be."

"That seems like a great grace to pray for this week!"

Mary recalls that Psalm 69 speaks about getting stuck in the mire and invites Andrea to pray that psalm, a few verses at a time, every day over the next week or two, trying to notice her desire for freedom and asking God for it at the beginning of her prayer.

The conversation then turns to other matters. One that Mary notes is that Andrea comments that she hasn't been riding her bike this week because it is in the shop. She is looking forward to getting it back and getting out in the hills again next week. As they close the session, Mary prays a few verses from Psalm 69.

This session is essentially what Mary presents to her supervisor, Art. She is interested primarily in the story of the wildebeest calf and the insights that Andrea received from it, which is why she has selected this portion of the conversation. Mary is not certain that she and Andrea have mined the possibilities. What is there still to be revealed? What has Mary missed? A portion of her session with Art follows.

Art: Let's begin today by reading this dialogue. You be Andrea, and I will read your part. (They read the dialogue parts aloud.)

Mary: The first thing that strikes me as I read Andrea's part is that I have a lot more energy around "boxed in" than "resistant," but "resistant" is what I picked up on with Andrea. It did go somewhere, though—back to the interpersonal arena, her relationship with her mother. It's the first time we've really gone there, although I have been aware, at some level, that Andrea needs to be nice. [Mary thus begins in the intrapersonal arena, affective dimension, noticing that she has more energy inside her around the term "boxed in." But she quickly moves to the interpretive dimension to assess the effectiveness of her move with Andrea.]

Art: And the image of "wild beast" has now given you a way to open up this area in the future. She may very well return with more associations. Notice, however, your energy around "boxed in" and her "trapped" at the point where she recognized the pun in the image. You had energy around the same sense that she brought up again. [Art starts in the interpretive dimension, where Mary is, but he underlines the nature arena as the locus of Andrea's experience and notices that the image has a lot of potential for future unpacking. He then invites Mary to go back to the affective-imaginative dimension of her own experience to see what else is there for her.]

Mary: That suggests that the trapped feeling is probably present in other areas of her life besides the obvious one of the situation with the pastor. [Mary responds quickly with another connection in the interpretive dimension.]

Art: You will want to be on the alert, but don't assume that you know. Wait for her to "tell" you in some way. Any data in the conversation? [Wanting Mary's interpretation not to get too far from Andrea's experience, he sends her back there for testing.]

Mary: Well, the obvious is the way she gets boxed in by both the pastor and the Education Commission . . . And there is also the matter of the bike being in the shop. She couldn't ride this week, leaving her "boxed in" from her usual exercise. And her regular time outdoors, come to think of it, is where she is not boxed in at all, but goes as far as her legs can carry her. [Mary notices another experience of being boxed in in another arena of Andrea's narration, though neither of them had made the connection at the time.]

Art: Uh-huh. And it came to Andrea in the reflection time that she is like the trapped calf. Did you notice what you did with that noticing? (pause)

Mary: Oh, I turned it to asking for freedom.

Art: Without pausing to open up "trapped." You moved very quickly to the antidote. [Art encourages Mary to slow down to more fully unpack the multiple dimensions of an important image.]

Mary: (thoughtfully) Oh yeah, I did, didn't I? And the word that had energy when I read Andrea's part was "boxed in." Maybe it is a word for me. [Mary assumes some simultaneity between her and her directee as indicated by energy on similar words.]

- Art:** Let's ask it. Go to the word and see if it has something to say to you: another word, an image, a memory, a present situation, whatever. (They slip into silence. Mary closes her eyes and sits quietly). [Art thus invites a noninterpretive and potentially contemplative moment to be part of the revelation.]
- Mary:** Odd, but what comes to me is the words from Psalm 139, the part about "You hem me in." How does it go? Something like "Behind me and before me you hem me in, you lay your hand upon me." But I don't feel trapped at all, though I know some people do by this psalm because it seems that they are hemmed in by an all-seeing God from whom they can't escape. For me, this psalm is always a comfort (it is today, too). Because I know that I am known, and it's okay and comforting. [Mary starts nonthematically from the felt sense, then moves quickly from the words to a rather wordy interpretive aside and back to the nonthematic sense of being known and taking comfort.]
- Art:** Stay with it a little longer; be in the words of the psalm. Let the psalmist pray them through you. (Silence for several minutes.) [Art recognizes Mary's penchant for intellectualizing and helps her experience through more dimensions.]
- Mary:** (sighing and opening her eyes) That was so sweet. It's as if, because I am known, I can do anything I want and need to. I know it will be okay. (pauses, savoring)
- Art:** Here's a way to pray for Andrea, too: that the trapped feeling could dissolve into being held by God in complete transparency and love. [Art expects that the experience Mary has just had has some connection to the work she is doing with Andrea.]
- Mary:** Oh yeah!
- Art:** So, at least today, the word "trapped" has led you to your own way to pray in support of Andrea's desire for freedom. Kind of nice of God, isn't it?
- Mary:** (smiling) Uh-huh. (They savor the graciousness of God for a few moments.)
- Art:** I also notice that you didn't do anything with Andrea's sense that she was irritated with God. Your suggestions are usually fruitful; Andrea takes them and does something with them. She's a "good directee" in that way. It's how fast . . . [Art starts to move from the present verbatim to other times when Mary has moved too quickly.]

Mary: (interrupting) Oh my gosh! I wonder how nice Andrea needs to be with *me*? [Mary, relying on simultaneity, makes a new connection that could have major implications for her work with Andrea, and beyond.]

Art: Good question. What made you ask it?

Mary: Because I can't think of even one time when Andrea hasn't done exactly what I suggested. If there was a time, I don't remember it.

Art: Whether or not you are correct Andrea will eventually confirm. But it is clear that she is struggling with expressing her irritation with her pastor, and she probably isn't good at doing it with God, either. [Art notes the possible negative simultaneity between Andrea's lack of freedom in the interpersonal and structural arenas.]

Mary: Yes, I see . . .

Art: If she needs another place and relationship in which to practice being free, you could suggest yours.

Mary: Oh, right! (She makes a wry face.)

Art: No, seriously. Would you be free enough to let Andrea quit being a "good directee" for her own growth?

Mary: Now there's a question! I really don't know. I do know I have liked working with Andrea, and I do suspect that it has helped that she is always so compliant and complimentary.

(Mary and Art continue looking at Mary's other directees. They notice that she does favor those who are compliant. They begin to explore Mary's need to "keep" directees "good" by her own lack of freedom to let directees struggle, not only in her presence, but directly with her.)

A single instance of supervision over a single direction session can only suggest the richness of the model. Its primary virtues, I believe, are that it invites us to a very wide understanding of God's activity and encourages multivalent reflection on the multidimensional experience of Mystery. It invites us not only to see more adequately, but also to bring this richness into our direction and supervision. It invites us to live consciously the vision of another poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God"¹⁸ and "For Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces."¹⁹

Notes

1. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 40–41.
2. Rainer Maria Rilke, "You, neighbor God" ("Du Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manchesmal"), *Poems from the Book of Hours*, trans. Babette Deutsch (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1941), reprinted in *A Christian's Prayer Book: Psalms and Prayers for the Church's Year*, ed. Peter Coughlin, Ronald C. D. Jasper, and Teresa Rodrigues (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, n.d.), 124. The metaphor of the wall built of images that surround God like names is principally a function of the particular translation.
3. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, in *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George Ganss, S.J. (New York: Paulist, 1991), #234, #235, #233.
4. Rahner's key essays include: "The Experience of God Today," *Theological Investigations XI* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 149–65; "Experience of Self and Experience of God," *Theological Investigations XIII* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 122–32; and "Institution and Freedom," *Theological Investigations XIII* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 105–21. See also *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), Introduction and chapters 1–4; and *The Practice of Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), chapters 10–11.
5. Rahner was primarily concerned to illumine God's self-communication—God with us; upon this concern he built a theological anthropology that accounts for how this communication occurs. Catherine LaCugna rightly reminds us that this discussion needs to be balanced by the other term of the Trinitarian paradox: that "God freely, utterly and completely bestows God's very self in the encounter with human persons, yet God remains ineffable because the creature is incapable of fully receiving or understanding the One who is imparted." See *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 231.
6. Ron Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 2004), 223. See pp. 218–30 for a brief yet clear summary of Rahner's understanding of God's graciousness and human freedom.
7. Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, 1998), 119.
8. Maureen Conroy, R.S.M., "The Ministry of Supervision: Call, Competency, Commitment," *Presence I* (September 1995): 13.
9. William Creed, S.J., "Supervision Plus Reflection: A Way to Form Spiritual Directors," *Presence 4* (January 1998): 37.
10. Elinor Shea, "Spiritual Direction and Social Consciousness," *The Way Supplement 54* (autumn 1985): 30–42.
11. Peter Henriot, "The Public Dimension of the Spiritual Life: The Problem of Simultaneity," *Soundings* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Concern, 1974): 13–14, quote from p. 13.
12. Various versions of the Experience Circle exist. Nancy Wiens has surveyed the history of the development of the Experience Circle, under its various names; see "The Definition and Role of the Environment in Christian Spiritual Discernment," unpublished paper, Graduate Theological Union, December 14, 1998. She has also done sustained philosophical and theological reflection, in dialogue with the theology and natural sciences literature, on the meaning of nature and environment as it impacts the Experience Circle. Wiens may be reached at nswsj@aol.com.
13. Original graphic courtesy of Lorraine Nelsen.
14. This diagram is adapted from several versions of the Experience Circle in use in the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Nancy Wiens has made significant contributions to this particular version.

15. Clearly humans are both a part of nature and also distinguishable from the rest of the created order in their ability to reflect and act on their reflection. It is impossible to develop such nuances in the context of this essay, though they will eventually be available through the work of Wiens (see note 12). For our purposes in this essay, I will use "nature" in its common-sense meaning, namely as the created but non-human order.

16. Helping skills are based in contemplative awareness and taught and practiced throughout our training modules. Beginning contemplative listening contains the skills that receive and expand the experience; while advanced contemplative listening adds probes and challenges.

17. My thanks to Rev. Catharine Collette for several discussions of this case, which she uses to present the Experience Circle in the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction at San Francisco Theological Seminary. The elaborations for purposes of this essay are my own.

18. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 128.

19. Hopkins, "As kingfishers catch fire," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 129.