

9-2009

# Noticing the Duck: The Art of Asking Spiritual Questions

MaryKate Morse

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Morse, MaryKate, "Noticing the Duck: The Art of Asking Spiritual Questions" (2009). *Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary*. Paper 22.  
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the George Fox Evangelical Seminary at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.



## The Art of Asking Spiritual Questions: “Noticing the Duck”

**MaryKate Morse**

I have a friend, Paul, who would go once a month to his spiritual director's office for a conversation. After almost a year of these monthly hour-long visits, Paul noticed a beautiful wooden duck sitting on the bottom shelf of his spiritual director's bookcase. The bookcase and the shelf with the duck on it were in plain view, directly behind where his spiritual director always sat, but Paul hadn't seen it before. He said, “Oh, I see you have a wooden duck on your bookshelf! Is it new? It looks so real.” The spiritual director replied, “No, it's always been there. I received it several years ago as a gift.” Paul couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it before. Paul's experience, however, is not unique. Many of us miss seeing obvious things in our lives, even things as beautiful as the wooden duck.

The task of spiritual direction is often “seeing” what is obvious but has gone unnoticed, sometimes for a long time. Paul “noticing the duck” can serve as a metaphor for the task of spiritual direction. The spiritual director helps the spiritual directee to “notice the duck,” the mysterious activity of God that often goes unnoticed in a life. It is masked by our busyness and non-reflective lifestyles. The spiritual mentor, friend, director is looking over the bookshelves of someone's life, searching for the duck. Finding the duck is not always easy, but one way to search for it is to ask questions. Questions are a tool for helping people notice what might be overlooked. Nonetheless, asking spiritual questions is not always easy to do. Good questions are rare. Many questions are leading, dead-end, abrupt, intrusive, or poorly asked. So, if a spiritual mentor or director is looking for the duck, who serves as a guide for asking good questions? What types of questions might be

asked? Are there any barriers? And is there an etiquette to the practice of asking spiritual questions?

The purpose of this article is to explore the art of asking spiritual questions. It is an art because listening to a person speak while also seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit requires a creative attentiveness to the process. Spiritual directors impose no expectations on time with our spiritual directees beyond believing that God is present and loves. The questions themselves are *spiritual* because we are not doing therapy or discipling individuals toward a church's or faith's particular understanding

of the spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> We are not trying to teach doctrine or fix a relationship or resolve a crisis. We ask questions to discover where God is moving in someone's life. We are looking for the duck.

Spiritual direction or spiritual mentoring is a relationship between a person seeking a more Christ-like<sup>2</sup> life and another who serves as a guide to the process. Spiritual direction is fundamentally the art of listening to the soul

journey of another. Some who teach about listening to others believe that a guide should not give any “direction” or input such as asking questions.<sup>3</sup> Rather, they say, a spiritual guide's responsibility is to create a space for grace so that in the experience of sharing a person finds his or her own truth. Generally, this is the case. Having a safe, grace-filled environment in which to give voice to the inner stirrings and doubts of one's soul is profound. But we are infinitely able to hide from ourselves and deceive ourselves into accepting some truth that might be a distortion of our true selves. Therefore, questions can sometimes nudge a person toward more awareness or even open her or him to an avenue of thought not previously considered. Jesus was a spiritual guide who asked lots of questions, and he serves as a model for the usefulness of questions during spiritual conversations.

*Having a safe,  
grace-filled environment  
in which to give voice  
to the inner stirrings  
and doubts of one's soul  
is profound.*



**Jesus: Master of the Questions**

The gospels of the Christian Scriptures (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are replete with questions that people asked Jesus and vice versa. Jesus understood the power of the question to get beneath the surface and reveal the primary issues. He would often ask a question before acting or respond to a question with a question. Jesus used two basic types: rhetorical questions and information questions. Rhetorical questions are those for which no answer is expected; the answer is obvious and thus remains unspoken. The correct answer to Jesus' rhetorical questions often exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders:

And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him [a man suffering from dropsy] and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this. (Lk 14:3-6)

Jesus asked the second type of questions, information questions, to probe motives or to invite a person to speak his or her desire. This type illustrates the potential that questions have for uncovering what is less obvious or what needs to be given voice. The story of the lawyer in Lk 10:25-28 illustrates this:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Instead of answering the lawyer's question, Jesus asked him a question. He turned the focus back on the lawyer, effectively defusing his attempt to trap Jesus. Then Jesus used the lawyer's answer as his own. Sometimes in spiritual direction, spiritual directees ask questions in order to keep the attention focused on the spiritual director and not on them. They are nervous, want to be polite, or are avoiding the conversation. On these occasions the

spiritual director's role is to flip the question back rather than answer. Doing so is a gift of hospitality; the time is returned to the spiritual directee.

Another example of an information question is found in Lk 9:18-20, when Jesus asked the disciples about his identity. He asked the easier question first and followed with a harder one.

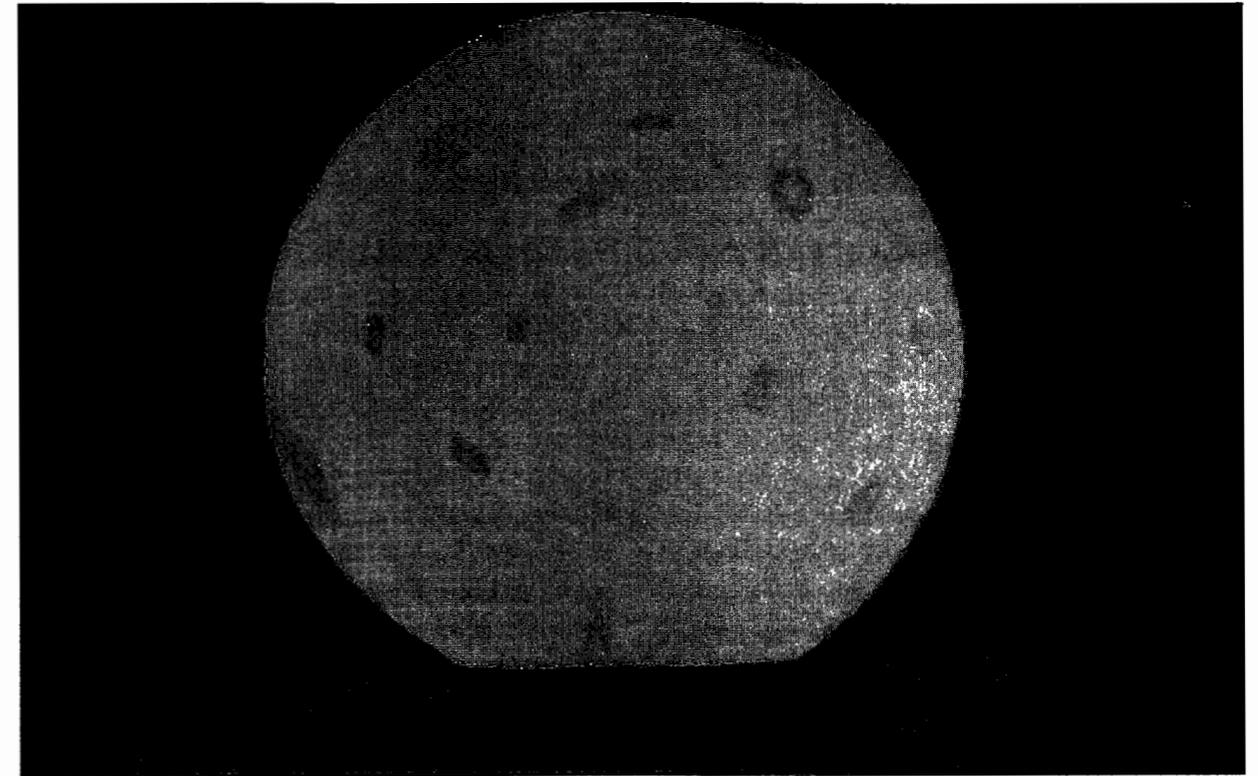
Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

The art of asking spiritual questions is often precisely this, going from one question to another like stepping stones, allowing the Holy Spirit to uncover the movements of God.

The ease with which Jesus engaged persons with questions bears witness to the clarity of his calling. Hostility did not distract him or lead him to self-doubt. If the disciples or crowd were confused, he did not try to pacify them. He didn't need to prove himself worthy of their devotion. Neither was he afraid. Jesus brought his full attention to the concerns and needs of those before him. Spiritual directors have the same responsibility to bring our full attention to those before us without internal distractions. Being able to ask good questions requires attentiveness to our own spiritual states and security about our own identities and calling.

**Barriers to Asking Spirit-Led Questions**

The listening process in spiritual direction moves between attending to the spiritual directee and attending to the spiritual director. The spiritual director is not in a pristine, uninvolved state. Spiritual directors pay attention to their own inner worlds at the same time they are listening to the inner world of another. As spiritual directors and mentors, we are mindful of our inner states. When we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit while hosting the journey-telling of another soul, we can become either doors or barriers to the process. We are doors when we stay in a listening-hosting posture, paying attention to our inner world but not being absorbed by it. We are



"stunnedsilence" — Michael Woolcock

barriers when we become distracted by what is going on inside of us. Paying attention to our own internal activity as spiritual directors is necessary. Monitoring our own thoughts and emotions while listening to the individual and the Holy Spirit requires a great deal of focus and self-awareness. Without focus, we rarely see the duck.

Three inner attitudes can distract spiritual directors or mentors from listening well. When we get distracted, we are unable to ask good questions. When these attitudes get in the way, we see only ourselves and not the duck. They are (1) arrogance, (2) fear, and (3) impatience.

Arrogance is evident whenever, while listening to the story of another, we quickly move to a conclusion and think about how to frame our response. This happens when we assume we know what is going on in the spiritual directee. We've had a similar experience, and we have a scripture verse or a teaching to share. When we become arrogant, we believe we know the answer. There is no deep listening. In arrogance, sometimes leading

questions are asked in order to get a person right where we want them. We do not listen, because we have already drawn our conclusion. Such thoughts act as barriers to the Holy Spirit and to the person discovering his or her own truth. There is a difference between a spirit of arrogance and a word from the Holy Spirit. The test is this: if there is a feeling of pride, rightness, or hurry, it is a spirit of arrogance. If there is no personal feeling of pride or hurry, the door remains open for the movement of God. If we are absorbed in our own thoughts and how they might be framed, that is a spirit of arrogance. Instead, if we listen to the Holy Spirit rather than jump to familiar assumptions, a question might arise rather than an answer.

Fear is the opposite of arrogance. Instead of rushing forward with knowledge, we rush away internally with anxiety. This happens when a person tells us something that overwhelms us. We feel "out of our league," so to speak. I have almost heard it all, and I have discovered



*The art of asking spiritual questions is often precisely this, going from one question to another like stepping stones, allowing the Holy Spirit to uncover the movements of God.*

that as soon as I get anxious about what to say or do next, I've shut the door to the Holy Spirit and the person in front of me. One of the primary disciplines of a spiritual mentor is to stay centered and focused on the person. If we cannot, we rarely can listen for the questions. As soon as we focus on our own fears, we lose connection with the Holy Spirit. When this happens, the spiritual director must try to return his or her focus back to the individual. In attentive listening, sometimes a question comes.

The third and less common attitude is impatience. Sometimes we wish people would just get to the point. We hear so much; sometimes it's hard to be completely present with someone going over the same material we've heard many times before. The answer is obvious to us, so why don't they figure it out or get over it? It's interesting to notice how often Jesus simply let people be where they were. He didn't warn them that they were completely off base or tell them to hurry and get it together. He let them be responsible for their own journeys. Our responsibility is to give a person space to settle into his or her soul. A question can stimulate reflection, but feeling hurried shuts people down.

Being self-aware while simultaneously remaining attentive to the other allows us to be in the optimal space for when and how to ask questions. Even though I will suggest different types of questions, it's most important to stay tuned to the Holy Spirit for what might be the best questions to ask.

### Types of Questions

My family tells a story of a conversation between my grandson, Kai, who was six at the time, and his dad, Matt. Kai was walking home with his dad, who had Kai's

little two-year-old brother sitting on his shoulders and slumped over his dad's head, fast asleep. Matt was holding on to Martin's feet, trying to keep him securely on his shoulders, and to the hand of Kai. The three of them came to a busy street that they needed to cross, but Matt was having difficulty getting a clear view of the road. So he asked Kai, "Do you see any cars coming?"

Kai replied, "Dad, you should say look both ways to see if any cars are coming."

"You're right, Kai. Look both ways. Do you see any cars coming?"

"Dad, you should say do you see any trucks coming too."

Just as Kai instinctively understood the value of clear questions, different types of questions help clarify the spiritual journey and present different ways to explore an individual's spiritual house. The following list of question types begins with easy ones to use for introductions and ends with others to use only when trust and rapport are fully established. Then the spiritual director or mentor can explore various rooms in the soul that might have previously been closed.

### Beginnings: Getting-to-Know-You Questions

Beginning questions are usually easy for people to answer. People are not anxious or confused by them. These questions give the spiritual director a starting point for knowing the person and his or her spirituality. Beginning questions are not leading questions. Leading questions are asked when someone wants a particular answer. These questions, on the other hand, have no right answers. A person may respond in any manner they wish without any internal fear of judgment. The following are some examples:

*Being able to ask good questions requires attentiveness to our own spiritual states and security about our own identities and calling.*

- ❖ Who is the first person who created a memory of God for you?
- ❖ What is your earliest experience of God?
- ❖ Who is your spiritual hero-role model?<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ What is a story from your life that represents the essence of who you are?
- ❖ What is a story that represents your current need?
- ❖ When you think of God, what picture comes to mind?

### Ready to Go: General Current Spiritual Reality

General questions that probe understanding about the spiritual directee's present spiritual reality are a helpful way to progress. For instance, questions from Ignatian<sup>5</sup> spirituality explore the current movements within a person either toward God, called *consolations*, or away from God, called *desolations*.<sup>6</sup> However, for those not trained in Ignatian spirituality, simply asking the following questions accomplishes, in a general way, the same outcomes. They are not sophisticated, but they help describe the current spiritual reality of a spiritual directee. They are open questions, so the spiritual directee brings whatever level of intensity or investment he or she desires.

- ❖ What is your desire for God?
- ❖ What is God's desire for you?
- ❖ What are the hindrances?

### Going Deeper: Specific Current Spiritual Reality

Once a person feels comfortable, the spiritual director or mentor can invite the person to share more about how they usually experience God, what their specific feelings are right now, and what they have done to nurture a relationship with God. At this point in the relationship,

the spiritual mentor begins exploring the spiritual house, becoming familiar with its habits, pitfalls, graces, and struggles.

- ❖ Tell the story of your spiritual journey from childhood to today. Include the history of your family and your growing-up experiences.
- ❖ What has been happening in your prayer life?
- ❖ What are your predominate feelings about your relationship with God?
- ❖ Do you have any internal movements (calls, inclinations, intuitions, initiatives)?
- ❖ Are there specific blocks or temptations in your spiritual life?
- ❖ What are your patterns or habits for sustaining your relationship with God?
- ❖ Who are your friends and closest relationships, and how are they sustaining you in your spiritual walk?
- ❖ How are you growing or developing spiritually in your work or ministry?
- ❖ How do you discern the presence of God in your life?

### Going Still Deeper: Unpacking Questions

When a deeper trust is established, a spiritual director or mentor can begin to gently guide a spiritual directee into interior areas he or she might normally avoid. These are areas where a person feels unfree and internally bound. These are places where she or he feels confused, ashamed, or frightened. Sometimes individuals will tell a story that has intense meaning for them, but they don't know why. They have very strong feelings of hurt, betrayal, confusion, or anger. They wonder about God in the story. On these occasions a spiritual





director might simply ask “Why?” several times. This is not the “why” that looks for reasons to explain why something happened or why someone did something. Instead it is the “why” that explores underlying feelings and thoughts. Asking “why” can lead to insights about what is fundamentally troubling about an experience. The questions create potential for the Holy Spirit to bring new awareness.

Though I use this type of questioning less often, I have found it to be very effective. Therefore, I want to go deeper into its meaning.<sup>7</sup> After each explanation, the spiritual director responds with another “why”: Why do you think such and such? Why do you feel such and such? Why does that bother you? The whys are continually asked until the spiritual directee arrives at the core insight. The whys are always asked with gentleness and humility. If at any point the spiritual directee begins to show signs of distress, the questioning stops.

To give an example, I used this line of questioning with a spiritual directee who was a pastor.<sup>8</sup> He shared that he was feeling unmotivated and tired. He didn’t like going to his church office because someone might need to talk with him, and he just didn’t have anything more to give. I asked him if I could explore this with him, and when he said yes, I asked, “Why do you think you are unmotivated and tired right now?”

“I don’t know for sure. Maybe I just need a vacation or a sabbatical. I’ve been doing this for twelve years, and I’m not getting anywhere with this church.”

“Why does it matter to you to get somewhere with this church?”

“Well, we’re supposed to bear fruit and grow, right? I feel pressure during the monthly gatherings with other area pastors. They ask me about my church. What do I say? We aren’t growing. We’re actually declining. We’re going nowhere.”

“Can you tell me why you feel pressure from the pastors?”

“I feel pressure to succeed. And I’m not. I feel like a complete failure. This just wears me down.”

“Why do you feel like a complete failure?”

“When I accepted God’s call to pastor, I thought if I prayed and followed Jesus as faithfully as I could, and loved the people in the church, that God would bless my work, and it hasn’t happened.”

“Why does it matter to you that God bless your work?”

“It’s a sign of God’s favor, right? If you’re following God and doing everything you’re supposed to do, then people will come to church, and they will grow in faith.”

“Why do you need a sign of God’s favor?”

“Because when you get one, then you know you matter to God. I feel abandoned and unimportant to God. I feel like God has dumped me here in this town and left me to struggle.”

By answering a series of “why” questions, the pastor went from tiredness and frustration about his church

to awareness that he felt abandoned by God, since he hadn’t experienced any signs of God’s blessing. At this point I could choose various options that require other kinds of questions. For instance, is the pastor burnt out because of an unhealthy lifestyle and unbalanced ministry expectations, so it seems that God isn’t present? Or is God leading him to a new understanding of faith and a deeper awareness of his own inner needs? Can he love God when God seems absent? Regardless of which avenue of questions I might pursue next, the important point is that the spiritual directee opened the door to something previously kept unspoken. Used with the Holy Spirit, “why” questions help people discover the underlying issue in a difficult situation.

*At this point  
in the relationship,  
the spiritual mentor  
begins exploring the  
spiritual house, becoming  
familiar with its habits,  
pitfalls, graces, and  
struggles.*



**Discerning the Deeply Stuck Places:  
Probing Questions**

Usually when people share the stories of their lives and spiritual journeys, one or two of those stories connect deeply to what is going on in their relationships with God. These stories open up places in their lives that have large spiritual implications. These stories can be as insignificant as a small boy breaking a rule or as huge as a car accident in which someone dies. They are difficult to discern on our own effort, but with the input of the Holy Spirit, we might hear something we might normally miss. I listen very carefully to the whole story, and I listen for the event that seems to bear more weight than others—the catalytic moment in their lives. When I hear one of those, I will often ask the spiritual directee to go back and “tell me more” about what happened. This can be an event of grace or of darkness.

Once a spiritual directee began by telling me she had never experienced God in her entire life. So I asked her to tell me her life story. While telling the story, she briefly shared a strange experience she had as a small girl at the age of seven or eight while observing a flower in a meadow. When she finished, I asked her to go back and tell me more about that experience. We spent fifteen minutes or more on a story she had mentioned in a few seconds. I kept asking her questions until it became real to her again, rather than a half-forgotten moment in her past. She had had, in fact, a mystical experience of God’s glory. As a little girl, she had understood that it was a personal revelation of God to her. But now it was buried in the present difficulties of her adult life. Rediscovering that story led her to other stories of times when she experienced God through people and through God’s unusual provision.

These are probing types of questions. The spiritual director or mentor brings to life something tucked away and forgotten. These questions are like circling the scent of the Spirit and looking for a way to let in light or let out darkness. Sometimes, this type of questioning focused on an event can lead to inner healing prayer or a profound awareness:

Can we go back to such and such? Tell me more about it. What do you see? What do you smell? What are you feeling? Where are you standing? Are you alone? What’s going through your head? Is anyone else there?

**Q-Etiquette**

So what is the etiquette for question-asking in spiritual direction? Etiquette is not a popular concept. In much of Western culture, etiquette is often perceived as a bunch of rules and prescribed behaviors that stifle natural, authentic interactions between persons. However, etiquette is more than suggested guidelines for how to behave at meals or in social settings. In spiritual direction, etiquette is simply the way of honoring someone by treating the person with dignity and care. Here are a few guidelines for question-asking etiquette for the spiritual director or mentor.

- ❖ Ask questions that focus on the person, not your perceptions. It’s not about you. Avoid lengthy stories about you or giving explanations about your views, experiences, or theology. Withhold any response or question until you have fully listened.
- ❖ Keep the questions open, not closed. Questions that get a yes or no answer or lead the spiritual directee to a specific conclusion are closed questions. Open questions give the spiritual directee opportunities to honestly share whatever is going on within her or him.
- ❖ Maintain the spiritual directee’s connection to his or her spiritual quest, not any connection to you. Be careful to keep a neutral, grace-filled, and hospitable stance. Some people with attachment disorders or victim problems will try to stay connected to and need you rather than focus on their spiritual development. They may ask you questions in order to feed your ego and to make you the “rescuer.”
- ❖ Always get permission to go deeper. “Do you mind if I go a little deeper? May I ask you a follow-up question? May I push back on that a little bit?” None of these types of questions can be forced. If a person tells me, “I don’t want to talk about it,” we don’t talk about it. I once waited a whole year before a spiritual directee brought up again a particularly difficult situation. When she brought it up, she was ready to bring it into the light.
- ❖ It’s a stroll, not a sprint. Pace and match the person’s emotional state and stamina. If the person is depressed or tired or anxious, trying to have her or him share more is not helpful. Simply be present to what he or she is able to bring.



Asking spiritual questions in spiritual direction honors the people we are hosting. It says that we want to know more. We care. We believe there are rich, beautiful spiritual worlds in them to explore. We convey that darkness isn't the end, and light can always be found. We are listening, and we will go with them wherever the Holy Spirit leads. The spiritual director or mentor's role is to notice the duck—to notice what we might miss without careful attentiveness and gentle questions.

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart

and try to love the questions themselves ...

Don't search for the answers,  
which could not be given to you now,  
because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is, to live everything.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps then, someday far in the future,  
you will gradually, without even noticing it,  
live your way into the answer.

— Rainer Maria Rilke ■

## Notes

1. The focus of spiritual direction is a person's relationship to God. The focus of counseling or therapy is a person's relationship to herself or himself and to others. The focus of discipling is on a person's relationship to God in the context of a faith's theology and spiritual traditions.

2. As a Christian and a spiritual director who works with Christ followers, the goal and desire is to become more and more like Christ. We center on him; we focus on who he is and what he teaches. Other faiths center on or meditate on other persons or teachings. Most faiths have a spiritual role model, saint, teacher, rabbi, or guide who serves as an inspiration for a life centered in love and lived in wholeness.

3. Parker Palmer's "circles of trust" and Quakers' use of "worship sharing" groups are based on accepting completely the response of an individual without asking questions. For instance, Parker Palmer believes that in time the act of being heard will guide the person into his or her own truth; see Palmer's *A Hidden*

*Wholeness*. It is a beautiful, life-giving book for persons who want to gather regularly in community for support as they explore their interior worlds.

4. I usually tell people not to use Bible persons or saints, because there is a tendency to believe that some are "holier" than others, thus creating a feeling of competitiveness. I'd rather have people share about someone from their personal life journey.

5. Saint Ignatius (1491–1556) was the founder of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. He is known for his Spiritual Exercises, prayers, devotions, and exercises carried out over thirty days. He was an accomplished spiritual director. Many people today use the Spiritual Exercises to deepen their faith.

6. The layperson wanting to understand Ignatian spirituality should consider studying Silf's *Inner Compass* and Tetlow's *Making Choices in Christ*.

7. This type of questioning is called "The Five Whys" by Rick Ross, cited by Senge in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (108–112). "The Five Whys" are found on various Web sites and can be used as a tool for self-improvement or business management. Sakichi Toyoda, the originator of the technique, used it to problem solve. The theory is that continuing to unpack a problem often leads to insights about its root source.

8. Stories used in this article are representations of various conversations. Many details are changed.

## References

- Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Towards an Undivided Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. Letter Four to Mr. Kappus, written Worpswede, near Bremen (July 16, 1903).
- Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. New York, NY: Currency Book, 1994.
- Silf, Margaret. *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2007.
- Tetlow, Joseph, SJ. *Making Choices in Christ: The Foundation of Ignatian Spirituality*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008.