

ASCENDING THE MOUNTAIN: DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP

Spiritual companions and directors are fortunate to accompany those who seek our aid as they unspool and discern their own unique sense of God, the Universe, or however they might refer to the essence of all. We are like mountain guides facilitating the ascent, reinforcing the growing skills of our counterparts, as well as appreciating the transcendent scenery from the top, which is different for each of us, even when we are right next to each other.

But what exactly are the skills that we bring to bear?

A couple of years ago, an SDI committee concluded its work on a "Portrait of a Spiritual Director," the latest in an ongoing set of iterations where we consider the universal distinguishing hallmarks of spiritual companions, independently of our faith traditions or spiritual orientations.

In the last couple of months I have had the opportunity to engage in a couple of deep dives allowing me to more thoroughly consider some other characteristics, but before embarking on those, let us recap the by now familiar ones, which encompass:

- **Contemplative grounding.** A prayerful, meditative, immersive approach. One that acknowledges that in order to access the Beyond, we must use channels beyond our rationality. And that we need to keep going back, over and over, to that wellspring;
 - **Good discernment.** We are intuitives, and quiet guides. We provide reasoned feedback (only when asked!), and we also try to evince balance and equanimity at all times.
 - **Accountable.** To ourselves, to the communities we serve, and to our supervisors, who help keep us honest.
 - **Lifelong learners.** We are committed to constantly learning (sometimes the same lessons, again and again, until they finally sink in).
 - **Respect agency.** We honour the unique character of each person we encounter, and we try to leave our own predilections and inclinations to the side, even when doing so is difficult, to allow our companions to find their own way through.
- continued on next page*
- **Deep listening.** Which is not a passive act, but rather a profound and supportive engagement with the people we companion;

DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP (CONTINUED)

- **Take care of ourselves, as well as others.** We are compassionate to others, but we also know the importance of taking care of ourselves.
- **Follow Universal Ethical Guidelines.** At the very least we “do no harm,” but more than that we endeavour to always comport ourselves in an ethically correct manner. And to admit our mistakes, and apologize, when we invariably make some.

Beyond the preceding, there are other qualities worth considering:

- **Exploration of the Unknown.** We position ourselves in groundlessness (so as to achieve maximum stability), moving towards the unknown with our companions courageously and fearlessly. We acknowledge that entering the field of the Beyond requires us to shed our preconceptions, to be humble, welcoming, and willing to let go. We also need to be ready to explore the shadows and sufferings that feed our collective spiritual growth.
- **Experiential, Reverential.** Understanding that our conceptual framings, as valuable as they may be, are in the end no substitute for a direct experience of God or the Universe. So we marry our intellects to our intuitions, and encourage those who we walk alongside to find their own balance between the two.
- **Mature and Committed to Growing Maturity.** Spiritual insight and revelations are critically important steps along the way, but, with some effort, are accessible to just about anyone. Spiritual maturity (or any kind of maturity really), on the

other hand, is not. Consequently, beyond the flashes of realization our colleagues and we encounter, we keep practicing living into our principles, with the hope that some growing measures of wisdom result.

- **Intimate.** We are “intimacy workers,” committed to getting up close with those we companion, and with the essence of the Universe, even when that can be very challenging. At the same time, we always honour healthy boundaries.
- **Committed to Mutuality.** Spiritual companionship is a two way street. And, as with most successful relationships, it is most fruitful when our preassigned roles start to fade away and we start to melt into each other. That is, when the false difference between self and others disappears, and we are swept into God's embrace together.
- **Skillful Means.** We try to recognize where people are at, with understanding and compassion, and meet them there without judgement. That means having enough tools in our arsenal to engage in multiple modalities, as appropriate. And it also signifies recognizing when we have reached our own limits, and being able and willing to refer those who come to us to others as circumstances warrant.

There are of course many other facets and attributes to spiritual companions and directors. We would love to hear your take! Please do send it along to listen@sdiworld.org.

Wishing you all much peace, serenity, and alignment during these trying times.

With love,

Rev. Seifu





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CO-CREATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 (1)

Life, like breathing, is a great circle.
We receive; we give back.
—Arthur Green. Personal Theology.

The rush of Mystery
terrifies

as we plummet
in free fall.

Gale-like winds
whip our hair
into knots,

and there is nothing

but uncertainty
to grasp at.

Yet always
the partnership

that has existed
every moment
of our blessed lives—

Even as we fall
we receive
breath

and are asked

return breath
to Me.

Jennifer (Jinks) Hoffman is SDI's Poetry Editor.



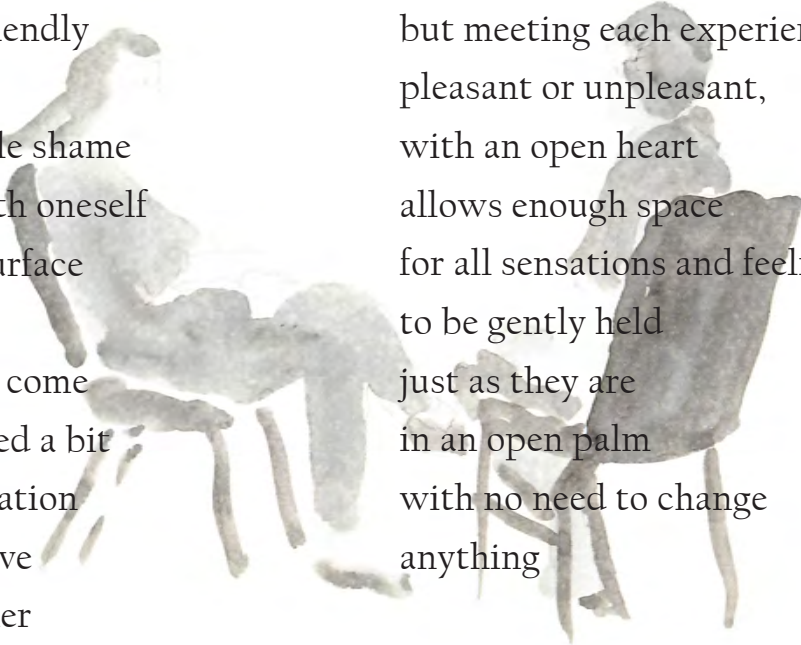
“We are like mountain guides facilitating the ascent, reinforcing the growing skills of our counterparts, as well as appreciating the transcendent scenery from the top, which is different for each of us, even when we are right next to each other.”



MEETING THE UNKNOWN

Someone who had been friendly
seemed to turn unfriendly
recently
An old habit of subtle shame
and finding fault with oneself
bubbled up to the surface
After a while
and over the days to come
these feelings released a bit
allowing a new sensation
of tenderness to arrive
both for self and other
So much is unknown

in life
but meeting each experience,
pleasant or unpleasant,
with an open heart
allows enough space
for all sensations and feelings
to be gently held
just as they are
in an open palm
with no need to change
anything



John Pollard, is a spiritual director and psychotherapist in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. John previously served as a member of the SDI Coordinating Council.

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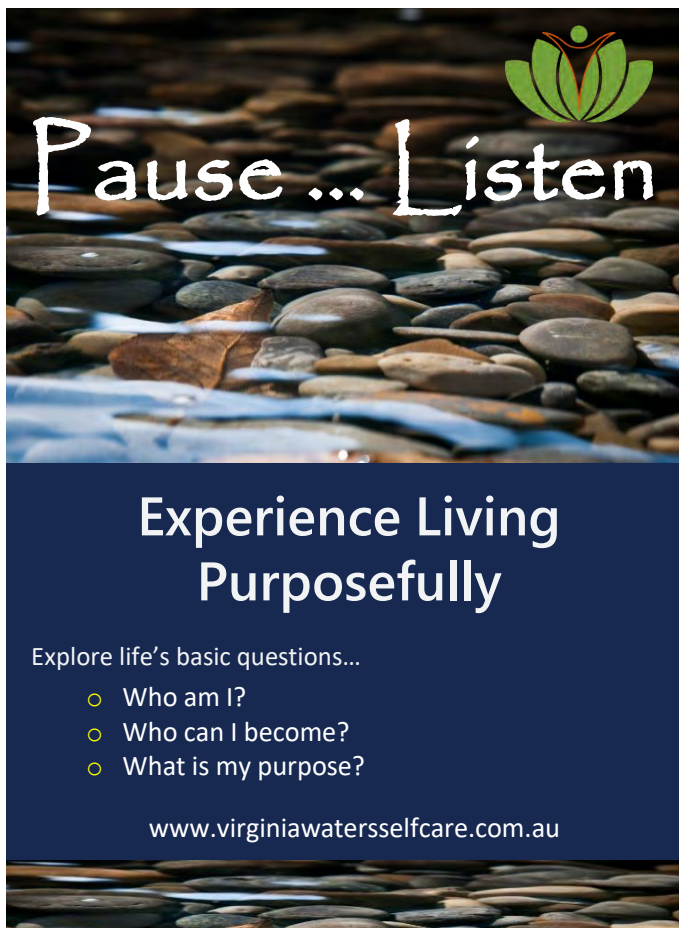
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*Min hameitzar karati Yah
Anani bamerchav Yah.*

From a narrow place, I cried out to God.
God answered me with wide expanse.
(Psalms 118:5)

All of my life, I have been blessed with close Jewish friends, who have taken me into their hearts, and welcomed me into their homes. So I've been very fortunate to celebrate Passover with them on numerous occasions, most recently, and meaningfully, last week. The Passover holiday has always resonated deeply for me, with its powerful and penetrating look at alienation and persecution, and with the resulting call to "Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

As a Zen priest, I am particularly struck by the notion of crying out to God from a narrow place, and being answered with a wide expanse. Which is the narrow place, and which the wide expanse, I wonder? Particularly when in this case one leads directly to the other? And what of the parallel of the immense suffering of the Jewish people as they fled Egypt, to the reward of God's infinite embrace? Suffering and strife are clearly the fertile ground for spiritual growth, and yet the paradox is that we need one to "get" the other.

What do you think?

-Rev. Seifu

(click to respond)



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