

## **HANDOUT: Choosing the Spiritual Companionship that's Best for You**

One of the five spokes of UUWellspring is outside spiritual direction; having someone outside the group helps offer perspective during the sometimes challenging work we do in our groups.

You may choose to engage a spiritual director in the more traditional sense, or find a spiritual companion - someone to be in conversation with, who is not necessarily trained but who takes the role of companionship seriously.

There are various kinds of companionship: all are valid, each with a different flavor:

- Certified spiritual directors are paid companions who are trained to listen deeply and have resources uniquely used to deepen a mentee's spiritual journey.
- Religious professionals (ministers, chaplains, religious educators, music directors) may not have formal training in spiritual direction, but do adhere to a code of professional ethics.
- Other companions who may not have the training but can still create deep relationships with the participant; they may be a long-time mentor or someone not in your Wellspring group but who has taken UU Wellspring and is willing to be a conversation partner.

Here are some things to think about when choosing a spiritual companion:

- Is this someone who can listen attentively and put your needs above everything else in the conversation?
- Is this someone who seems grounded in their own spirituality (and/or are they in spiritual direction themselves)?
- Is this person a personal friend, and can you set aside time separate from your relationship? (How will you differentiate between time as friends versus time in spiritual conversation?)
- Is there some reciprocal remuneration (gifts, payment, barter for services)?
- Are you okay with someone from a different faith tradition? If so, are you willing to spend time on definitions and explanations of your faith?
- Is this a relationship that will not suffer if you interview them and turn them down? (This could impact friendships/congregational relationships.)
- If this person is a psychotherapist, do they understand the difference between spiritual direction and psychological talk therapy?
- Can they help you with spiritual discernment without solving your problems?

This essay by Rev. Tina Simpson, "Is it OK to Talk to You About This Stuff?" may be helpful in your conversations with a potential spiritual companion:

We UU's are not too comfortable with the idea of having a Spiritual Director. We resist the concept of direction and often find other terms for them like Spiritual Partner, Guide, or Friend. Sometimes the only choices we have available are people trained in the Christian tradition and the sessions take on a type of translation, or searching for an agreeable language. So how do you navigate this new type of relationship?

Sometimes it helps to know first what Spiritual Direction is not. It's not psychotherapy. Individuals should not be looking for help to change behavior patterns, or to understand the motivations for neurosis. It's not to solve problems with relationships or intimacy or communication. And it's not to treat depression or anxiety or any serious Mental Illness.

Spiritual Direction is a journey you take with another in search of the divine. A spiritual director is a person who walks by your side and observes the path through an extra set of eyes. She helps you understand your relationships as soul expanders and challenges the edges of your beliefs. A spiritual director helps you seek and listen to the small voice inside yourself and see your struggles as growth. She holds open a door you have found and gives you permission to walk in.

The confusing thing is that we often talk to a spiritual director about the same kinds of things you might talk to a counselor about. We have the same life after all. But it's the focus that's different. The objective is to enlarge our understanding of our life to include a spiritual perspective. We may struggle with a relationship and wonder, how do I see myself in this person, how do I see god? That's different from, how do I improve my communication skills to make this better.

This year as a seminarian, I offered to meet with three Wellspring individuals as a Spiritual Partner or Friend. As long as they knew I was a student, I felt I could walk with them on this journey and offer support. These relationships have become so dear to me and have deeply enhanced my life and my own spiritual growth. I remember my Spiritual Director from last year saying the same things to me. He said he felt enriched each time he walked away from our discussions. So maybe that's it after all, a friendship rooted in deep listening and spiritual searching that feeds the heart of both parties. What a gift.

Finally, know that there is no shame if it takes you a while to find a spiritual companion, or if you find yourself resisting this part of UU Wellspring. As Parker Palmer advises, "when the going gets tough, turn to wonder" – consider what the resistance is about and learn from it.

Blessings on your UU Wellspring journey.