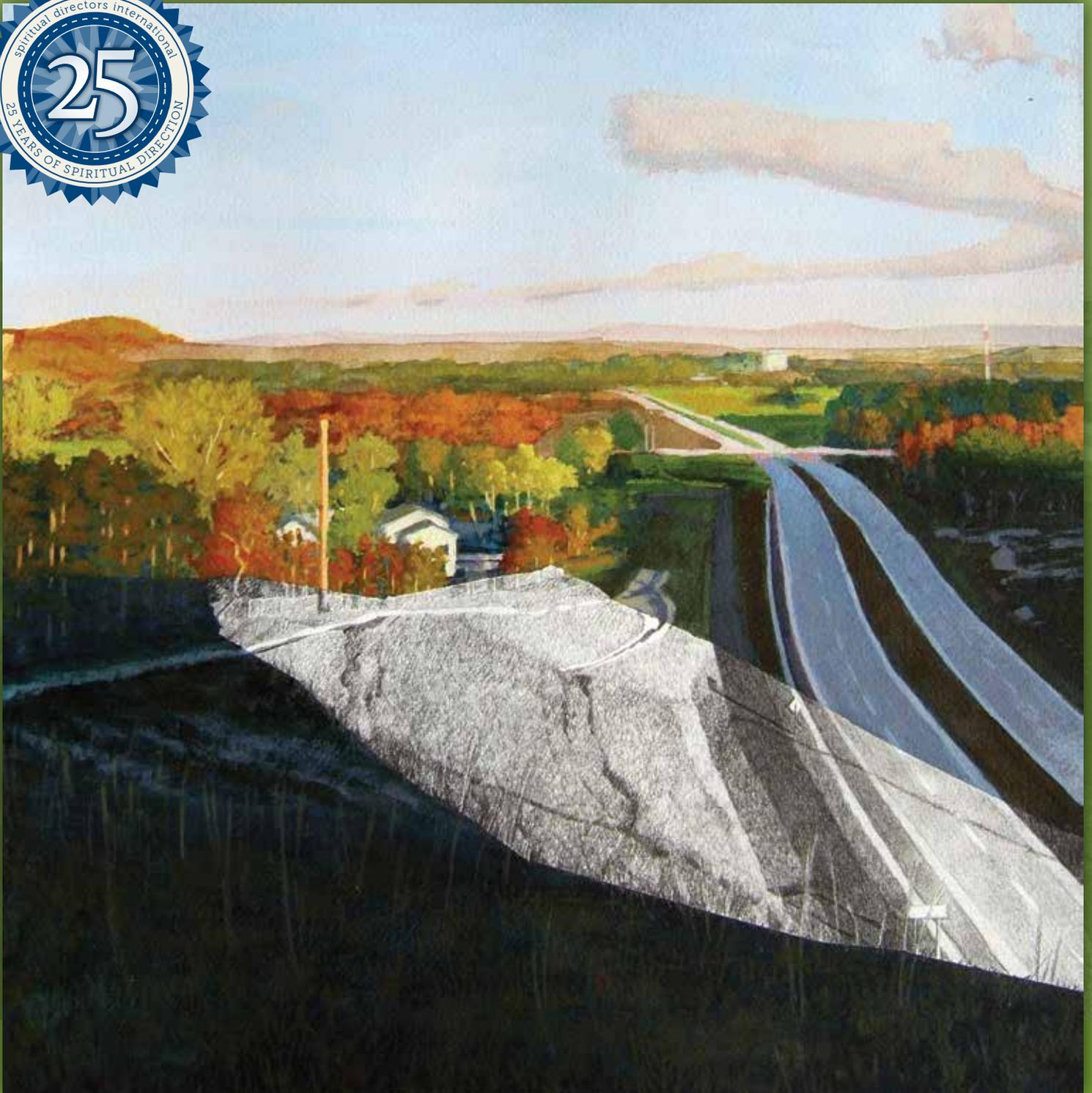
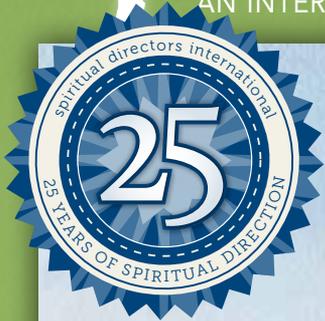


CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS INTERNATIONAL

# presence

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An Interview with Krista Tippett • The Contemplative Scientist

Ten Trends in Global Spiritual Direction • Who Knows?: On Non-Dualism and Spiritual Direction

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## New Life for Elders: Spiritual Direction in a Nursing Home

Linda Colozzi

**A**s chaplain and spiritual director of spiritual care at a nursing home for the past thirteen years, I have had the privilege of serving, learning, and growing in community with others who are open to the gifts of the Spirit. What I have found is new life in them, in staff, in me, in the whole community. This article reflects my experience and what I have noticed happening within relationships.

Whenever someone enters a nursing home as a new resident, transition is occurring in his or her life. Transitions are challenging no matter what age we are. When a transition arrives in what we may refer to as the elder years or the sunset of life, or even the end of life, it usually involves physical and mental distress, a mix of feelings of fear, grief, insecurity, loss, and often confusion stirring among the family dynamics. Spiritual direction received and offered to others has been a key factor that has supported my work and my personal spiritual, emotional, and mental development.

I have been receiving spiritual direction from the same spiritual director for more than seventeen years. She has companioned me through many very difficult and life-changing transitions. Today I recognize that the suffering I have transitioned through over the past forty years has brought me into a new life that is more joyful than I ever experienced in the past. Yet, today I work with death and dying every day! How did that happen?

In the role of spiritual director of spiritual care, my conversations usually point toward the spiritual dimension of life. Training as a professional chaplain taught me the basics of how to “be with,” “be present,” and “become aware” of the mysterious yet very real “something” that happens between people. We had to practice and get feedback from others about “what we were feeling” when we visited with patients: What went on within us, what did we think was going on in the patient, and what were the dynamics happening in the relationships in the room? I learned a lot about myself and grew in my identity as a chaplain.

However, nothing prepared me for the growth and

change I would experience being in community with others who know the love of God. I have been blessed to work within a facility owned and operated by a religious community of Catholic religious sisters. Before working here, I did not know even one nun. My personal spiritual journey began consciously when I was in great pain and began to pray to know God and know the truth. That journey brought me through a forty-year desert experience of learning to relate with God and with myself. Through that time of struggle for survival I learned to trust whom I came to believe was the risen Christ, Jesus.

Through my belief, daily practice of prayer, listening, journaling, and following the guidance received, I began to trust that there was a powerful force I could call upon for help and be led toward whatever was best for me. My faith grew stronger, and eventually I was baptized into the Catholic Church in 1991. Fast forward to the year 1997. Another turning point of transition occurred when I was having difficulty in relationships with others and asking for spiritual direction in prayer. I heard, “Go back to school,” and my mind said, “I don’t have the money, and I don’t have the time,” but my heart said, “Make one telephone call to Boston College.” And so, I did. That one call revealed the miracle answer I was looking for, and I began a joint degree program in counseling psychology and pastoral ministry, which led to chaplaincy training and into my current position.

I found over and over again on my journey that a very real life source that is divine and ever present with us everywhere exists and is my GPS [global positioning system] for life. It is my “God Positioning System” that is with me always and can never break down. I can trust that there is a divine indwelling within me and within all life that leads to more and a better life. In the cycle of life, as we humans know, there is a cycle of death that is part of it. Yet we fear death because it is unknown and unknowable. However, we go through so many little deaths all the time and never pay attention to them. We also have abundant life all around us and often miss noticing the miracles of it in our daily living. What does it take to wake us up? All I have to do is trust, be open, listen deeply, and notice the movements of the Holy

Spirit in me and around me everywhere all the time. Easy?? Well, simple, yes. Easy? No!

The elder residents in our nursing home continue to awaken me to the Spirit living among us all. For example, sisters who spent their lives serving the poor have stories and experiences that inspire us all when we hear them and reflect upon what happens when we listen with our hearts to one another and open together to the living source of healing love that calls us all to new life. Group spiritual direction is the format I use at the nursing home. One resident recently gave the group a name and new understanding to me when she called me over to find out if today was the day I had “Family Circle.”

The more I have matured in my own spiritual journey, the more present I can be to others. Together we offer each other compassionate listening and caring attention, and my job is to remember God is the source and spiritual director of us all, and to deeply listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit moving among us.

Residents gather in group spiritual direction twice a week with me and once on the weekend with a resident facilitating a prayer group experience. We often begin with music and reciting the “Our Father” prayer together to focus our attention and intention for our time together. Then a scripture story, psalm, or reading will be shared and reflected upon. Out of that comes the faith sharing. We notice together where God is working in our everyday lives. I have the privilege of reminding each person how loved they are and that their unique thought, feeling, idea, or story will bless everyone in the group by sharing it. Together we notice the way our living God is answering our prayers each time we gather.

The gifts I have received by working in the nursing home have blessed me every day for these past thirteen years. The residents, the families, the staff, the religious women and men, and all the others who acted in pro-

foundly loving ways provided models of human relationships that I wanted yet never really experienced in my life before. (How strange and amazing I think to myself as I see these words on the page!) The truth reveals how amazing and wonder filled is the journey into deeper relationship with God and each other. I was relationally challenged in my life and did not even know it until I began to grow again in a caring community.

Today I know more about my own grief and the need for companionship through those inner minefields where confusion, sadness, loss, anger, and all the other human emotions fire away like grenades rendering me powerless, helpless, and sometimes hopeless. With practice, with spiritual direction, with honesty, with facing fears and turning to God for help daily, I find the transitions of life moving us forward instead of remaining stuck in bitterness and regret. In the midst of relationship the Spirit labors to heal our woundedness and mold us into more compassionate and joy-filled people who can share our experience, strength, and hope with others.

In 2009, I created a week-long retreat for residents called “Growing in the Ministry of Presence.” We had five residents gather daily in group prayer, and each person received individual spiritual direction as often as he or she wanted it that week. Twice during the week, our group gathering included the larger group that has been meeting twice a week for ten years with prayer and faith sharing. By the end of that retreat week, the five residents wanted to continue to meet on the weekend even though I would not be there. That same prayer group that began in 2009 continues today with different residents and a different facilitator.

Reflecting back on how the Spirit moved among us, one of the original five residents decided to move back into the greater community on her own and begin a prayer group. While living alone she would call me and

*The elder residents  
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*The Open Gate*

*Christine 2012*

“The Open Gate” — Christine Labrum

fill me in on her group experience, and I would share it with our residents. She did well for several years until an illness brought her back again to live with us. She tells us now how much she missed the larger group when she was gone. After going through her own transition being here again and realizing she would be living here the rest of her life, she found new purpose in the Ministry of Presence and continues to reach out to other residents offering support and compassion.

Another one of the original five became a leader among some of the more mentally diminished and vulnerable residents. They looked to her for support, and she gave it with humor and caring. She discovered her gifts in writing as she interviewed residents and their families and wrote their stories in the community newsletter. When she died, she was remembered for the gifts she discovered

and shared at the end of her life. She experienced difficult transitions along the way to getting to that new life stage before she died.

Another way the Ministry of Presence reached out into the greater community was at a time when one of the original five residents told us about her grandson who would be going to France to teach English. We invited him to share with the group stories about his journey, and he accepted the invitation. He said he would write us, and he did. We wrote him back as a group and let him know that his relationship blessed us all whenever we heard about his travels and that we were praying for him.

Another one of the original five told us about a woman in prison who could use some prayer. We decided to write her and developed a relationship with her through the mail. We heard back from her through letters and

telephone conversations. She asked us to pray that her parole would go through, and we let her know we were praying for the very highest good for her. She was paroled, and she expressed her gratitude to us. Letters and prayers were shared as she went through a period of living in a transition facility, and then we heard she went back to school. Each time we shared her story, we were touched by love's presence and realized ever more deeply how God was working through us all.

Recently we heard from a volunteer who had been visiting residents for over ten years before she had to give up driving. One of the original five retreat participants reached out to her by sending our newsletter to her every month. I only heard about it when I learned in a telephone call that the volunteer was very ill in the hospital and wanted our prayers. We wrote her a card and prayed for her. Not long after, the resident received a telephone call thanking us for the card and thanking the resident for the newsletter that kept her connected to the larger community where she had made so many friends. Not long after the telephone call, we heard she died.

Relationships are so very integral to our journey through life. The healthier and more integrated we function in our relationship with our self (body, mind, and spirit), with a power greater than ourselves, which I call God, and with other people, whether family, coworkers, friends, or strangers, the happier our lives become.

I held a staff in-service to share what I do as a chaplain and to listen to the staff tell me why they work here (beyond a paycheck). The main reason they were here was the way they related with residents. They felt loved, and they loved them back! What testimony I heard that day that brought me to my knees in gratitude for how the Spirit is working for the good of everyone here and that "something" among us is encountered, valued, and shared!

My belief in the healing power of the Risen Christ for our good has proven over and over again to be true in my experience. People ask me how I do what I do. What I do is not something I do alone. When I sit with someone who is suffering or celebrating and we look together toward the spiritual direction rather than the shadows of fear, both of us are blessed by that "something" between us. I am not the spiritual director of anyone's path, and I can change no one but myself. When I listen deeply and

care about the one I am with, my heart sings. As long as I keep myself in fit spiritual condition through daily prayer and disciplines, I am gifted with the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the voice to speak what might be helpful in the situation. When I focus on others rather than myself, I find joy in all I do.

Group spiritual direction, which is now called "Family Circle," is a time when residents can choose to participate, gather together to learn, grow, and notice what the living God is doing in our lives from day to day. We consciously and intentionally look for the good that is happening and try to extend it beyond ourselves. We usually find ourselves more peaceful and joyful as a result of being in community with this focus of our attention. When there is pain and suffering among us, together we are compassionate listeners who care and wind up finding that the other person receives relief. The elders are age eighty-five or more, and they have found new life, new joy, new friends, and a new community in this new stage of life living in a nursing home! Families are grateful to see their loved ones thrive, and they are relieved of the burdens and able to provide quality visits.

As I have grown more aware and awake to the moment-to-moment changes that are happening so rapidly these days, I have grown in my ability to slow down and notice how the Holy Spirit is moving among us, helping us relate better to one another.

In the spirit of relationship and community building, I have begun a new initiative to support our mission of providing caring, compassionate service and creating an environment where all feel welcome and respected. A new faith-based family ministry began in 2014 to support families of residents reaching out to other families, especially families of residents who are new to the nursing home.

Spiritual direction provides a context for encountering the living God in our everyday relationships with one another. The more conscious and intentional we are about creating healthy and life-giving relationships, the happier people seem to be, and their joy is contagious. We are blessed to have people walk through our doors and see the smiles on people's faces and say to themselves, "Something different is happening here. I wonder what it is. Whatever it is, I like it!" ■