



A Puzzling Question about Post-Practicum Supervision

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For many years I have been puzzled by the failure of interns who have just completed a practicum as well as more experienced spiritual directors to seek and maintain a supervisory relationship for the practice of spiritual direction once their initial program has ended. Despite an experience for many of sensitive and fruitful supervision—a graced holding environment that helped spiritual directors notice missteps and miscommunication while there was still time to repair awkward or inappropriate responses—I would wonder why they would want to venture into continuing spiritual direction relationships without supervision support. Were they so successful as intern spiritual directors that they did not fully grasp how transference and counter transference are always going on and will subvert our work if we are not attentive to processing our more intense reactions to our spiritual directees? Were they so confident in their own helping skills, their ability to notice consoling movements and desolation in counter-movements, and spiritual discernment that they succumbed to the temptation to neglect their own spiritual direction and spiritual lives and yet offer spiritual direction to others?

It is only recently that one of my clinically experienced intern spiritual directors provided me with some clue from psychology about why many of us might be tempted to shirk our responsibility for continuing in either individual or group supervision. From her experience supervising psychoanalytic interns, she pointed me to an article by Susan Gill that described the feelings of “narcissistic vulnerability” experienced by therapists in training. From this social worker I gained a deeper understanding about the complexity of negotiating any supervisory relationship, including spiritual direction supervision, from the perspective of the supervisee.

Gill explores three themes in her essay: supervision and the ego ideal, self-exposure in supervision, and finally the particular challenges of a narcissistic supervisee for whom these issues are even more challenging. In this essay, I will make applications to spiritual direction supervision only in terms of the first two themes above and not address supervising a narcissistic supervisee. (For helpful guidance for supervisors working with narcissistic spiritual directors in supervision, see Susan Gill’s article.)

Supervision and the Ego Ideal

What then makes supervision threatening to supervisees? First there is a deep threat to the supervisee’s sense of self. Psychoanalytic theory has reformulated

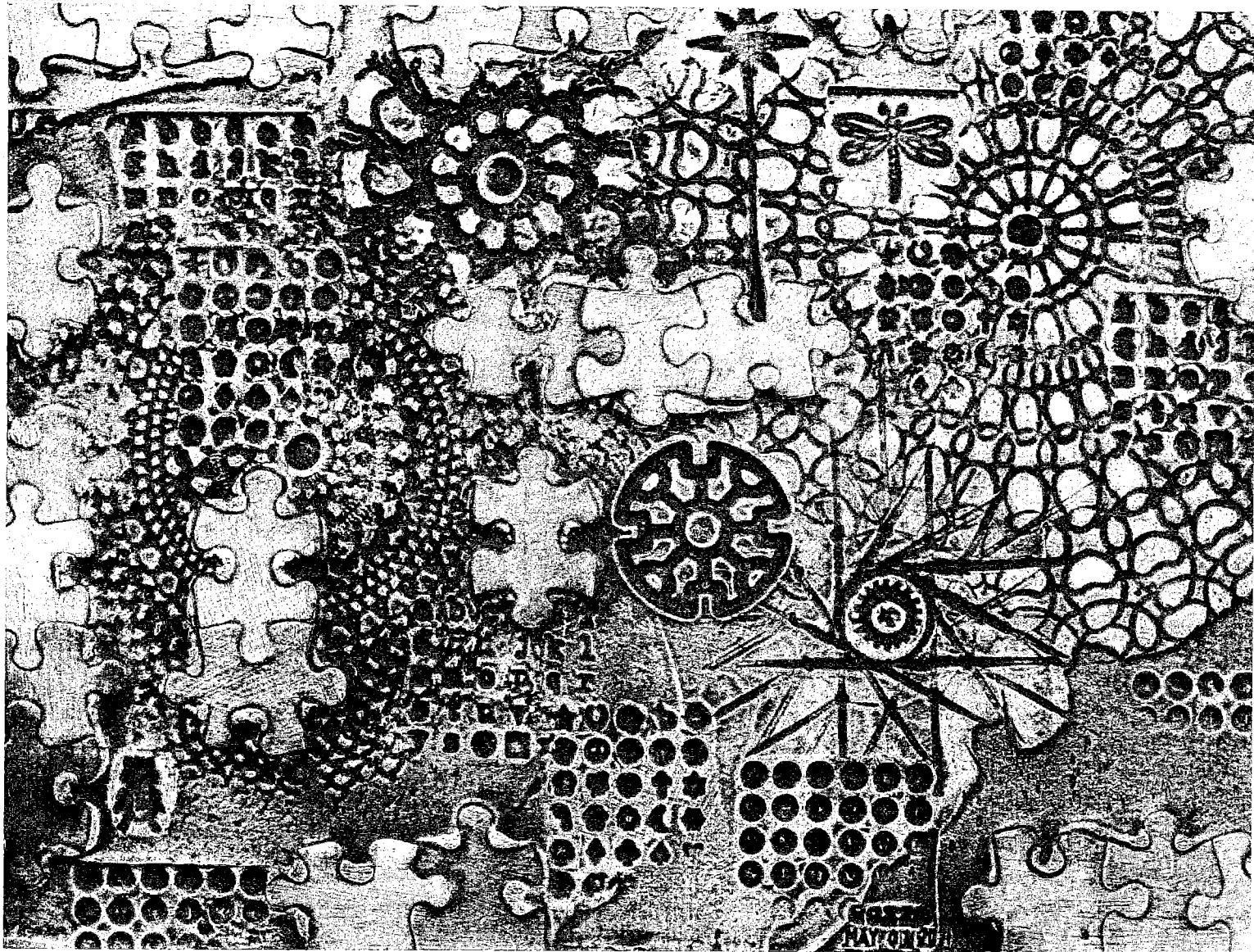
Freud’s initial concept of the “ego ideal” as the notion of the “ideal self” and the “experienced self.”

According to psychologist Roy Schafer, “Whenever one measures his performance against his own standards, he is comparing experienced and ideal self-representations” (cited in Gill, 228).

In the experience of supervision, spiritual directors like therapists are continually confronting themselves and their images of themselves. Psychiatrists Daniel

Jacobs, Paul David, and Donald Meyer describe the dilemma posed: “The gap between one’s ego ideals and the perception of one’s actual self and actual performance tests self-esteem” (cited in Gill, 228). I found this description helpful, especially in the case of clergy, therapists, and other professionals who want to add spiritual direction to their professional competencies. The threat to their self-esteem in the face of obvious “beginner’s mistakes” when they thought they were very advanced helpers is an experience they work to avoid. Such avoidance blocks growth as a spiritual director and, potentially, spiritual growth as well. The supervisee’s self-expectation of mastery without making mistakes at the beginning of a new form of interpersonal helping may be quite unrealistic.

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"Orange Blue Puzzle" — Paul Bozzo

Supervision and Self-Exposure

A second threat to self-esteem is rooted in the complexity of any supervisory experience. A spiritual director who is under supervision may feel impelled to project an aura of authority and mastery even if it has not been achieved in a particular helping relationship because both the supervisee and the spiritual directee expect it. By contrast, in the supervisory relationship, the intern spiritual director is the "knowing" spiritual director when with a spiritual directee but also simultaneously the "unknowing" supervisee. This role shift requires the supervisee "to shift back and forth between these two opposing self-representations" (Gill, 228). Trying to integrate these two senses of self (the self who knows and the "self who seeks to learn") creates an added level of vulnerability. Such vulnerability may become a catalyst for emotional and spiritual growth if the spiritual director can embrace the challenge.

Pastoral theologian Martin McAlindin [64–65] discuss-

es resistance to supervision by clergy because they believe that ministry is a vocation and not a profession. Clerical structures tend to foster authoritarian decision making and tend to resist systems of accountability. He highlights the shift in power relationships from power over to sharing power as required to overcome resistance to supervision. Although this analysis is true, it does not describe the sources of vulnerability and why they create resistance.

In addition, the need to uncover a parallel process between supervisor and supervisee and a matching dynamic between the spiritual director and the spiritual directee only serves to intensify feelings of self-exposure—including mistakes made with the spiritual directee, or simply a lack of spiritual or psychological knowledge as well as exposure of the spiritual director's own thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious that emerge in supervision (Gill, 229).

In addition to these sources of vulnerability related to ego ideal and negotiating the constant role shift,



supervision in a dyadic relationship elicits memories and feelings about other teacher and learning situations and other authority transferences such as parent and child, spiritual director and spiritual directee, and therapist and client. Intern spiritual directors come to the supervisory experience with their personal histories of ability or inability to tolerate external criticism from authorities, peers, or their spiritual directees and still maintain sufficient self-esteem and resilience to benefit from supervision and apply it to the spiritual direction relationship. "The degree of integration the supervisee has achieved over loving and hostile representations will influence his or her ability to withstand external criticism or antagonism from [spiritual directees], colleagues or supervisors while preserving some stability of self-esteem" (Gill, 230).

Descriptions of supervision within a psychoanalytic context also highlighted that intern therapists experience supervision as more threatening than their personal psychoanalysis (Spitz, cited in Gill, 229). How much more threatening might supervision be to spiritual directors who have not explored their subjective reality in therapy or psychoanalysis? Their sense of exposure may be even greater because their typical internal processes may be largely unknown to them. This implicit sense of vulnerability in supervision leads some supervisees to censor process material and to neglect presenting cases that are the most challenging to them. They might also interpret criticism or suggestions as rejection. Self-exposure in the form of verbatims, process notes, and discussions of work with a supervisor unpredictably expose the spiritual director's ability, intuition, intelligence, feelings, and blind spots—all intensifying vulnerability.

Despite the discomfort a supervisee may feel as a result of this vulnerability, it may offer the supervisee an opportunity for personal spiritual growth as a result of the need to turn to God for guidance and support both in spiritual direction sessions and in supervision. Simultaneously,

the spiritual director's sense of vulnerability may help the spiritual director recognize a similar vulnerability in spiritual directees. Such vulnerability can lead to gentleness and compassion for oneself and for the spiritual directee.

In the structured process of a spiritual direction practicum, supervision may be either individual or group or some combination of both. The group work promotes the learning of all group members from the work of their peers, while individual supervision offers privacy from one's peers when exploring or self-disclosing internal dynamics a supervisee might be unwilling to share in the group. The group process also makes room for diverse responses to the material presented by another's spiritual directees and potentially expands the spiritual director's subsequent responses. Group members may also sense the presence of God in the spiri-

tual directee's story in ways that open up such grace for the spiritual director and for the supervision group itself. Some supervisees will feel safer in the group receiving mutual peer support from the shared challenge, misery, and even exhilaration in this time of learning while others will feel safer in the dyadic situation depending on the trust the supervisee has achieved in the supervisor.

The high level of mutual support that intern spiritual directors feel as a result of their shared learning during preparation for the practicum as well as in the practicum experience itself may be one of the major reasons that recent graduates fail to set up a new supervisory relationship. If they have one or two spiritual directees, and the work has gone well, they may feel more competent than they actually are. As sessions accumulate with spiritual directees, they may not be prepared for the development of transference and counter transference that had not already occurred in the eight to ten sessions of the practicum. Yet even more important, these spiritual directors may simply be unconsciously unwilling to undergo the intensity of feelings in relation to ego ideal and competency aroused by supervision when they are no longer part of

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a peer group. A peer group formed with neophyte spiritual directors will not pose the same challenges to self-esteem, because such a group might not have among themselves sufficient life experience, clinical training, depth of spiritual experience and knowledge, or experience in spiritual direction to really learn from one another's case work and help one another.

The naïve sense of some spiritual directors that they do not need to continue to grow beyond the level of an intern group seems to be a form of denial. This posture may undermine the development of spiritual direction as a ministry. Nowhere else in our culture is there any sense that advanced learning is complete with initial educational experiences. Yet in the spiritual direction world, quality in-service and learning experiences seem optional. Many spiritual directors do not engage in deep learning in terms of both process and concepts that happen in competent supervision arrangements. This is most likely because of the threats to ego ideal and the degree of exposure required in the supervisory experience.

These descriptions might be helpful both to spiritual directors who have just not gotten around to making arrangements for supervision (time, expense, and challenge all being factors) as well as to those who offer supervision within the spiritual direction community. My hope would be that spiritual directors might come to a better understanding of what's at stake in supervision and choose to overcome their avoidance and return to supervision in some form as an opportunity for spiritual and ministerial development.

Empathic Attunement of Supervisors

Supervisors who are aware of the emotional complexity and challenge of supervision for their supervisees may be able to offer more support. The quality of the supervisor's empathic holding environment (that is, the supervisor's ability to join with their supervisees in their thinking and feeling while at the same time remaining

differentiated) helps to reduce the spiritual director's vulnerability in supervision.

The supervisor needs to empathize with the supervisee. By understanding the supervisee's vulnerability, the supervisor may identify feelings the supervisee is not recognizing but is nevertheless experiencing. Empathy allows the super-

visee to explore uncomfortable feelings or blind spots evoked by work with spiritual directees. By helping supervisees acknowledge thoughts and feelings that seemed unacceptable, the supervisor helps the supervisee explore uncomfortable feelings and bridge the gap between the ideal self and the experienced self. This modeling can help the spiritual director offer a similarly safe environment for spiritual directees and risk gentle evocation and probing of the spiritual directee's feelings, failures, thoughts, and inspirations.

Further, it is important to note

that all of these descriptions so far apply to all of us and not to narcissistic supervisees who will present even greater challenge because of their inability to tolerate any external criticism in either one-on-one or group supervision.

Empathy

Empathy is the primary key to being able to "join with" a supervisee in successes, mistakes, oversights, fears, tastes of Mystery, and brushes with sin and evil. There is a clear relationship in supervision and spiritual direction between empathy and contemplative attitude. In spiritual direction supervision, the supervisor's contemplative attitude and God-connection in the session strengthens the effect of empathy. If the supervisor expresses his or her being with the supervisee at the same time as being with God, the supervisee may also experience growth in this ministry through supervision as a God-initiated event. Frequently, supervisees are unwilling to risk deeper explorations with their spiritual directees when they get to the middle stages of the relationship. They are afraid to "rock the boat" and stir up anything that might impair the comfortable feeling of the relationship. (See "An Integrated Model of

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Supervision" [Ruffing], which describes the stages in the spiritual direction and supervisory process. The middle stage is everything that happens after initial interview and building a working relationship and before a process of termination begins. Within a framework of eight to ten sessions, the middle stage would be sessions four to seven or so. The middle stage ends once acknowledgment of termination occurs.)

While spiritual directees do not come to spiritual direction to be unduly disturbed and are not seeking therapy, they do come because they desire to gain perspective and grow in their life in God. This growth usually happens through the deeper understandings, appreciations, and challenges that unfold in the presence of another spiritual person who is unafraid to go where God has already gone or is trying to go with a spiritual directee. This requires spiritual directors to learn how to gently probe to help spiritual directees notice more than they might on their own. Many will not be able to do this unless they experience a similar style in the supervisory process. When they do not fall apart when the supervisee poses a question or makes an observation, they learn from such empathic attunement that they can risk greater intimacy and depth in their exploration of their spiritual directees' experiences.

What do we mean by empathy? Pastoral counselor and psychoanalyst Beverly Musgrave defines empathy this way:

It is the ability to tolerate the tension of being truly open to the experiences of another person, the ability to attempt actively to understand the subjective world of the other affectively and cognitively while at the same time remaining a differentiated self. (153)

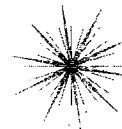
Musgrave's definition holds in equal balance both the cognitive (the spiritual directee's thoughts) and the affective (feelings). Based on Carl Rogers's description of the therapeutic alliance, we can see that this empathetic stance of a supervisor entails unconditional, nonjudgmental positive regard for the supervisee. According to Rogers, "It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other's life,

moving about in it delicately without making judgments" (Rogers, 142). For therapists, spiritual directors, and supervisors, such moment-by-moment accompaniment requires helpers to experience their clients'¹ thoughts and feelings, to communicate that understanding, but also not to fuse with their client. Hence, we glimpse the importance of differentiation. According to psychologist David Snarch, "Differentiation is your ability to maintain your sense of self when you are emotionally and/or physically close to others, especially as they become increasingly important to you" (56). Further, Musgrave asserts that "differentiation is the key to mutuality" (151).

In the supervisory process, the quality of the supervisor's empathic holding environment, namely to join with their supervisees in their thinking and feeling while at the same time remaining differentiated, is critical. The communication of what the supervisor "catches" and reflects back to the supervisee helps identify the not-yet-recognized feelings of the supervisee. This allows the supervisee to safely explore uncomfortable feelings, blind spots, and judgments evoked by work with spiritual directees in a safe holding environment. The supervisor's acceptance of the supervisee just as he or she is allows the supervisee to acknowledge thoughts and feelings that seemed unacceptable to the supervisee. By accepting these contents as normal reactions, the supervisor helps the supervisee to bridge the gap between his or her ideal self and experienced self. By remaining differentiated, the supervisor encourages profound mutuality in the process of exploration and interpretation, so that together they might piece together what belongs to the supervisee and what the supervisee's responses to spiritual directees reveals about the spiritual directees.

Empathy is thus a way of being in relationship in the supervisory process. As a skill it includes the movement between temporary identification "being with" the affect (feelings) and "searching to understand cognition" (reflection) of the supervisee. Through identification, the supervisor intuitively knows what the supervisee might be feeling and thinking on the basis of the supervisor's feelings, imagination, and experience.

1 In the context of spiritual direction, "client" refers to someone seeking spiritual support and guidance, such as a spiritual directee, retreatant, parishioner, congregant, or seeker.



If a supervisor expresses too much empathy, he or she is over-identifying with the supervisee. Over-identification represents the loss of separation and boundaries (differentiation) and creates unhelpful emotional involvement. Over-involvement and loss of objectivity may result in a missed opportunity for the supervisor to offer education or focus on skill development because of the intensity of the feelings. At the other extreme, a supervisor's over-objectification of the supervisee's experience may result in rigid boundaries, flight, or theologizing. These responses may become too distant or intellectual.

Appropriate identification and differentiation (objectification) can contribute both to the felt sense of the presence of God and to an awareness of movement and counter-movement. A supervisor's empathy, combined with reflection, enables supervisors to use their personal understanding as well as their contextual understanding of both the supervision/spiritual direction relationship and the supervisee's/spiritual directee's life experiences. The supervisor may do this in a variety of ways. Supervisors may:

- * recognize core issues,
- * help spiritual directors focus on the affective but avoided experiences of their spiritual directees,
- * underscore the way God is present to both the spiritual director and the spiritual directee,
- * use information to frame questions to invite a supervisee's further reflection, understanding themselves and their spiritual directees more deeply.

Conclusion

I have perhaps answered my own puzzling question with this reflection. Underestimating the threats to self-esteem and narcissistic vulnerability of spiritual directors in the supervisory process may account for resistance to supervision after a practicum experience regardless of how successful supervision might have been during a spiritual director formation and training program. Bolstered by group support and hopefully the empathic attunement of the supervisor, some of these threats may be ameliorated. If recommendations about ongoing supervision also include acknowledgment about the complexity of the relationship and education about the likely felt threats to self entailed in on-going supervision, spiritual directors may better understand their own avoidance and rationalization.

For many years, I continued to offer group supervision to interns who continued to see one or two spiritual directees and who remained in the vicinity upon completion of the practicum. I was privileged to witness, over about a three-year process, tremendous growth in each spiritual director, increased capacity to learn from one another's spiritual direction ministry, and integration of knowledge, skills, and contemplative presence. At the end of that period, most were clear about their call to spiritual direction and were better able to benefit from group supervision and to contribute to the supervision of other members in the group. In the initial post-practicum stage, however, they appeared to need the supervisory skills and experience of the supervisor. Such an arrangement might help novice spiritual directors to remain in supervision upon completion of a practicum. ■

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