For most readers of this journal, Tilden Edwards needs no introduction. He is founder and senior fellow of the Shalem (pronounced “sha-lame”) Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland. Shalem’s roots go back to 1973, when Tilden, an Episcopal priest and head of an ecumenical center in Washington, D.C., began meeting with a group of people who desired to deepen their relationship with God through contemplative awareness. Out of this small group came a program for spiritual directors, called the Spiritual Guidance Program, with the first class meeting in 1978. The 2-year program has continued ever since, producing hundreds of spiritual directors and many books by Tilden, Gerald May, Rose Mary Dougherty, and others.

Shalem, an interesting name choice, is from the Hebrew word meaning whole or complete. Scripture tells us to worship God with a lev shalem, or a whole heart. A wholehearted, contemplative approach to spiritual direction aptly characterizes the many written contributions of Tilden Edwards—most notably such books as Spiritual Friend, Sabbath Time, and Living in the Presence. His recent work Spiritual Director: Spiritual Companion (Paulist Press, 2001) provides an updating of Spiritual Friend and the backdrop for the present interview. The editors of Conversations felt it would not be appropriate to host a theme issue on “The Nature of the Journey” without including a conversation with Tilden Edwards.

Interview

GWM: Having already written one of the most widely used texts on spiritual direction, Spiritual Friend, what motivated you to write this present volume?
TE: I wrote *Spiritual Friend* in 1980, at the beginning of the Shalem Institute’s first extension program for the enrichment of spiritual directors. I felt that it was time to provide a fresh basic text that views spiritual direction and its context of the spiritual life and modern culture from the vantage point of many more additional years of experience.

GWM: In addition to benefiting from 20 years of your experience as a spiritual director and trainer of spiritual directors, you wrote *Spiritual Director* *Spiritual Companion* from a contemplative stance. Please explain what this means—so a 5-year-old can understand it.

TE: Ironically enough, many 5-year-olds probably intuitively understand a contemplative stance without need for an explanation! A young child participates in the wonder of life more fully as it is, before the mind separates from what is in order to interpret and judge it in the mind’s limiting categories. This gift of the child’s way of direct presence may be what Jesus invites us to when he says that unless we turn and become like children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. As we grow older, we tend to lose this sense of immediate, open presence in what is as we become more attached to our mind’s categories of thought as the ultimate, sole definer of reality.

A contemplative stance in a Christian context involves a loving, immediate presence to what is, just as it is, in God. That means a willingness to lean back into the larger, gracious Presence in the moment, wanting to be available to the hidden Spirit at the heart of what is, wanting to appreciate life flowing from God’s wellspring. In particularly graced moments, this contemplative orientation tastes creation at its heart as an overflow of divine love and ebullience. God’s Spirit in Christ is sensed as pervading whatever is present in the moment with a beaming and radiant love. We’re shown our intimate kinship with this mysterious great Lover at the heart of reality.

**The director has the humble but vital role of prayerfully listening with the directee for that hidden movement, and encouraging his willingness to listen through his daily life for the divine dinner bell!**

GWM: Your explanation caused a line from a William Blake poem to flash in my mind: “We are put on earth for a little space to learn to bear the beams of love.”

TE: That’s a wonderful example of trusting the Spirit’s hidden presence in the stream of a person’s life. The director has the humble but vital role of prayerfully listening with the directee for that hidden movement, and encouraging his willingness to listen through his daily life for the divine dinner bell! That is, the directee is encouraged to listen patiently for the invitations to fuller and deeper awareness of union with the gracious heart of his being as he is ready to receive them, and to listen for the truer way of life that grows from that realization.

GWM: On page 119, you state, “In a contemplative spiritual direction context, my own sense is the most fundamental sin is a willful turning away from living out a direct connectedness with the liberating love and being of God, once we have been graced to realize that connectedness.” Is there anything you do as a director—albeit gently—to help the directee increase his or her sense of being able to trust God, to become more willing?
You can live in both your “knowing” and “unknowing” mind in an ongoing trust that you are never out of the gracious divine presence...

TE: The first thing a director can do is to share a period of silent opening and listening to the Spirit at the beginning of the session (as well as at other times, as it may be called for). That very act assumes and encourages an immediate connectedness with the gracious One who is there for us and in us when we become vulnerably present, even if we have no immediate “feeling” of this connectedness. Such an act of listening, trusting availability also models that way of being trustingly present for God’s intimate presence in one’s daily life. Beyond this, the director again and again can gently ask the directee where trust and willingness are, as the directee talks about her/his life. Such questioning holds up the centrality of our trust and willingness for increasing transformative intimacy with God in our deep soul-self on the spiritual journey.

GWM: What are three things I can do tomorrow to enhance a sense of contemplative awareness?

TE: First, you can open your prayer and see if you sense you are being drawn to contemplative awareness. Second, you can lean back into the larger gracious presence, suspending your “knowing” mind and appreciating what can replace it: an open, spacious, fresh quality of direct presence, a mind of “unknowing,” a mind available to the divine love that is the deepest wellspring for whatever happens. Third, you can live in both your “knowing” and “unknowing” mind in an ongoing trust that you are never out of the gracious divine presence, and in an ongoing yearning for the fullness of that presence to be realized in us and in the world.

GWM: While the focus of your book is to present contemplative (or “gifted”) spiritual direction, you present an outline of other types of spiritual companionship—master/disciple relationship, counseling-inspired spiritual direction, eldering and discipling, informal relationships, and mutual spiritual direction. I enjoyed reading your careful analysis of the potential strengths and weaknesses of each form.

It seems to me that the counseling-inspired spiritual direction is becoming very widespread. Would you say more about the potential strengths and weaknesses of this form of direction?

TE: Historically, spiritual direction at its purest was based on the relationship of a director with an intimate sense of God’s loving presence in her life, with someone who wanted to deepen her own true life in God. Modern Western psychology, as I understand it, grew primarily from the stimulus of a field that viewed itself as a secular science wanting to understand the physiological and psychological dimensions of the mind. This understanding was pursued both as an end in itself and also as a means of providing ways to help people cope more efficiently with their problems. In recent decades we see a much greater mutual openness between spiritual and psychological learning, sometimes to the benefit and sometimes to the confusion of both. A lot could be said in answer to your question, but in the little time we have here, let me identify just two strengths and weaknesses of counseling-inspired spiritual direction, as I see them.

One of its potential strengths is its conditioning of the director to avoid projecting her own experience and interpretations into the directee, missing the unique dimensions of the directee’s life in the Spirit. Another strength is the capacity of the director to be sensitive to psychological dimensions of a directee’s sharing that can help the director to recognize when a primarily psychological issue is showing up in the guise of a spiritual issue.

One of the potential weaknesses of counseling-inspired spiritual direction, at least in a more contemplatively oriented context, is the possibility that the director’s conditioning to be in a horizontal relationship with the directee—primarily dependent on his professional knowledge—might lead him to move away from a simple, open presence to the “third party” alive in the relationship: God’s Spirit. The director’s professional conditioned knowledge may become central, rather than this knowledge surrounding an “unknowing” core of availability to the living Spirit in the moment.

This weakness is extended as the director’s counseling conditioning leads him to want to be “helpful.” This very desire may lead the director to eclipse his immediate availability to the Spirit, which may involve just silent prayerfulness at times and desiring for the
Spirit to show itself as it will. A counselor once told me he spontaneously found himself in a different physical stance when he was counseling someone and when he was being a spiritual director: in the former he leaned forward, trying hard to understand and interact; in the latter, he leaned back, leaving room for the Spirit’s direct leadership.

**GWM:** Thank you, Tilden, you do a wonderful job presenting some of the common concerns of psychotherapy and spiritual direction—importance of the physical environment, dealing with resistance, how to begin the session, establishing a covenant (a version of informed consent), establishing boundaries in the relationship. I have to say I was amazed at the number of parallels you presented. What is your opinion on the costs and benefits of a future professionalization of spiritual direction?

**TE:** I think the primary cost of a future professionalization of spiritual direction would be the temptation to believe that we can objectify, standardize, and know more of the Spirit’s mysterious ways with a person through our analytical minds than we can, and therefore that we can develop comprehensive objective standards for the development and accreditation of directors.

Direction to me is primarily God’s work in the presence of our desire for that work to proceed, work that is sometimes secret and sometimes manifest to our consciousness in the direction session. The analytical mind is a gifted vehicle of reflection on what it can perceive to be happening between God and us, but it has a tendency to go off on its own and lose its connectedness to the Spirit’s immediate mysterious presence. Thus the mind needs to lean back into that presence again and again, touching into the mind’s true source of inspiration more directly. The director’s part in spiritual direction, I believe, is mostly willingness for God’s loving truth and a deep, humble openness to God’s often surprising presence.

One potential benefit of bringing to bear a professional dimension to spiritual direction is the weight that this dimension gives to the director’s accountability to the integrity of the directee. With the history of malfeasance in spiritual direction relationships, as in other intimate relationships, setting up certain standards related to personal boundaries, time commitments, and other areas that cultivate a sense of safety and trustworthiness for the directee can be valuable.

**GWM:** As a follow-up, you mention that the clearest distinction between counseling and spiritual direction is one of “focus and function” (p. 24). Please say more.

**TE:** Counseling, as I understand it, is focused primarily on the ways we are limited in our capacity to cope with our inner psychological forces and with other people. We go to a counselor to try to gain insight and greater flexibility related to the way we function in daily living. A divine force may be accepted in the relationship, but the primary intent of paying attention to that force usually is to use it to help us improve our personal effectiveness.

In spiritual direction the focus is on that divine force, on God, as the integral core of our being and purpose. We go to a director because we want to become more attentive to God’s Spirit in our spirit and freely live out of divine love, with the background help of scriptural interpretation and experiential spiritual tradition about what such love looks like. Spiritual direction finally is about healing our relationship with God, our overt separation from divine love, with a sense that all other kinds of human healing are related to that central healing. Its focus is not on an insular individual or social sense of wholeness, where individual or collective identity at the functional ego level is seen as the center of human reality. Its focus is on a sense of identity that is “hidden with Christ in God,” a sense of self that includes but is not ultimately defined by that ego level.

At their best, spiritual direction and various kinds of psychological understanding and counseling complement one another, and both can be seen to contribute significantly to human well-being.
GWM: One of the most distinctive contributions of this book is your focus on the nature of the soul. From your years of direction, what is the most important thing you’ve learned about the soul?

TE: That it is! That there’s so much more to us than our empirical physical/psychological nature, to which so much of our dominant culture would reduce us! “Soul” gives us a name for this “moreness” of our nature. “Soul” speaks to our core identity in the image of God. Using it with this meaning helps to overcome the kind of over-dualism between God and us that our language sets up when we only speak of “God” and “person,” as though these were realities that are ultimately, not just relatively, apart from each other. “Soul” speaks of the divine and the human dwelling mysteriously together in the center of our being all the time.

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Training in Spiritual Direction

GWM: What do you make of the explosive growth of interest in Spiritual Direction?

TE: The explosive growth of spiritual direction across many denominational and faith lines has multiple roots. One primary root is the greater sense of mystery than of confident clarity about the deep truths of life among many people today than was true a few decades ago. Combining this with a spreading hunger for soul-deepening in our society, we can see the attraction of two people gathered together regularly to attend directly the deep frontier of life, gathered to listen for the living heart of the soul’s mystery, the hidden, loving Spirit pulsing in and around us. Our greater awareness today of both psychological and spiritual understandings of the human journey as one of ongoing change and transformation, needing ongoing reflection and responsiveness, is another major contributor to this desire to have someone walk with us as we live into the unique ways our souls are called to appreciate and respond to the living Spirit.

GWM: Given that so many of the qualities of an authentic spiritual companion seem to be hard-wired from birth, can spiritual directors be made (trained)? And what is the number one training goal at Shalem?

TE: Historically, spiritual direction is seen as a charism, a God-given gift to be discerningly present for another person’s spiritual life. Just as with an artistic gift, this one cannot be created by any training program. However, for a person who finds people spontaneously seeking her out for attending their lives in God with them, which is one of the indicators of a spiritual direction charism, I believe that her way of being present for another can be enriched. That has been demonstrated in many ways in the 20 years in which Shalem has offered an enrichment program for spiritual directors. Our hope is that we can provide resources and support for this ministry.

Our number one goal, I would say, is to draw out a deeper contemplative orientation to presence with the directee, i.e., a way of being immediately and openly given to God’s Spirit in the moment, for the sake of the directee.

GWM: What is your best rule of thumb concerning discernment of the voice of God when working with a directee?

TE: Spiritual discernment is a big subject. Perhaps what’s most important in listening for God is a foundational willingness to want what God wants, to want what Love wants, to want what shows itself when such desiring is deeper than our desire for anything else. Such an inner orientation leads us to an ongoing daily habit of discernment, where we continually turn to God’s Spirit in our souls and rest openly there, wanting to be free to move in any direction that Love shows us.
If we see signs of this underlying and practiced willingness in the directee, then what he senses about the Spirit’s whispers in his life takes on greater credibility. These whispers also, I think, will need to connect in some way with St. Paul’s sense of authentic gifts of the Spirit, marked by light, peace, charity, and humility that spread to the community in some way.

The Spiritual Journey

GWM: You quote the 13th-century mystic, Rumi: “We have the energy of the sun in us, but we keep knotting it up at the base of our spine,” and offer the interpretation, “in other words, God’s life in and through us, asking our willingness to let go what is being held onto that impedes this radiation” (p. 32). Why is this so difficult to do?

TE: Ah, there is the question we all ask sooner or later, and keep asking! It brings us to the mystery of our confused, flawed, wounded human nature, and also, I think, to the mystery of the nature of love. In the ignorant and willful side of our nature, the protection and assertion of our ego identities are ultimate values. Much suffering and fear is born of this side of our nature. The spiritual journey is about the lightening of this condition over time, as we come in fits and starts to realize a different center of gravity: our deep souls and the deep soul of the world in God.

This ongoing conversion process seems to be needed, though, not just because of our flawed nature. I think it also shows us something of the nature of divine love, where we’re given the freedom for the flaws and their consequences by the very nature of love, but where that love would draw us through the very flaws toward the realization of the great Love at the center of what is. Felix culpa! Happy fault! Nothing is outside the orbit of grace. But it surely can feel like it until the grace is realized.

GWM: And if I’ve read you correctly, it is fear that keeps us living out of our small or false self, and divine love that frees us to live out of our deeper self that we find only in intimate relationship with God.

TE: Yes. Again and again Jesus tells his disciples not to fear, because fear is the natural first reaction of the confused small self that wants to protect itself from anything that it doesn’t understand or control. Divine love erodes the fear and replaces it with desire for our larger life in God.

GWM: What to do when a directee has a false view of God—a view that would make him retreat to living out of his small self?

TE: Every directee has a distinctive spiritual journey, with unique imprints and timings of grace, so I really can’t make any generalizations here, except to say that the director needs to trust that God is at work in the directee, even through his false view of God and “small self living,” and that the director can be attentive to the times that grace seems to be wearing away something of the falseness and leaving room to hear of a truer God and deeper self.

GWM: You list several qualities of a healthy soul (pp. 37-43)—spontaneous compassion, freedom, appreciation, awareness of creation’s interwovenness, holy wisdom, desire for the illness of God, and confident trust. Is the fruit of our journey toward God best measured with these?

Nothing is outside the orbit of grace.

But it surely can feel like it until the grace is realized.

TE: I believe these are qualities with which we are gifted on the journey, usually erratically rather than steadily, though. They are gifts, not accomplishments. What is ours is our desire for the Real One, the real, enlightened Beloved (though even that desire is infused with God’s desire for us), along with our willingness to live into the mysterious abyss of divine love as it shows itself, come what may.

GWM: You observe that across the major faith traditions, we see a range of different paths upon which people live out their spiritual lives—the paths of 1) devotion (marked by affective relationship), 2) action (emphasis on moral concerns), 3) knowledge (centering on intuitive wisdom and what we can grasp cognitively), and 4) fighting all the way (idol smashing).

I am fascinated by this for a number of reasons. Primarily, however, it strikes me that these paths seem to correspond to the prominent components of the person (emotion, behavior, cognition, and will/choice). I sometimes wonder if a primary reason for
denominational differences (not to mention preferred schools of psychological thought) is the tendency for one aspect of who we are (emotion, action, thought, will, etc.) to dominate and then color our worlds—no reference to the music group Chicago intended. Any reaction to this?

**TE:** The emphases of different denominations indeed can show the preference of one path or human dimension over the others. I think one of the challenges for congregations today is to find ways to enlarge their spiritual/psychic roominess, so that a larger range of people can feel at home. Even if a person has a particular path that fits the emphasis of a given denomination, over time he may well find himself stepping onto another path and find that there isn’t much room for him in the church where he is.

It’s important to note that all the paths can be underlain by the same contemplative orientation that seeks to be present to God in the moment through all that shows itself. Such an orientation can offer people a sense of greater connectedness to other people who are walking along a different path. This assumes that a contemplative orientation is not just a choice for a particular kind of person, but that it can be the underlying glue that bonds people beyond their differences. As someone has said, a contemplative isn’t a special kind of person, but everyone is a special kind of contemplative.

I think it could be of immense value for congregations to introduce all these paths as complementary rather than implicitly contradictory ones, even as they may emphasize one more than the others for historical reasons. This could save them from a lot of unnecessary battles and, especially with the encouragement of a shared contemplative orientation, support the underlying unity, breadth, and spiritual growing room of the congregation.

**GWM:** Would you say more about the two major pitfalls of all spiritual practices that you reference on page 76?

**TE:** The first major pitfall is a belief that spiritual nurture is in our hands, a belief that we can will our way to the possession of the kingdom through taking on particular practices. The mature witness of Christian tradition, though, shows us that spiritual nurture comes from the free wind of the Spirit. We cannot domesticate that Spirit through a neat system of guidance and predictable progress. In time, with the spiritual elders of the tradition, we come to see that it is for us to do the opposite of trying to control and collect things spiritually. Rather, it is for us to dispose ourselves to this holy wind with an unconditional trust.

Spiritual practice is about ways of sensitizing us to this divine presence already in and around us all the time and encouraging us to freely embrace that radiant love as the very heart of our true soul-identity, and to live out of its perceived movements.

The second major pitfall in undertaking spiritual practice is a subtle desire to have our cake and eat it too. We aspire to deeper spiritual life, but we don’t want to change. That confused friend we call our ego identity wants to keep all the forms of safety, identity, and predictability that we have. That sense of self wants to go through the practice mainly as a protective ritual to preserve the soul-shrinking kingdom of little self. In authentic spiritual practice I think our first prayer needs to be for the trust to release whatever we hold onto that keeps our sense of deepest identity separate from the One who lovingly lives with life-changing power at the heart of our lives.

Spiritual practices themselves I think are largely neutral. They can be used to escape or to embrace authentic life in God. It is not difficult to evade God in the name of God, as Jesus showed us in talking about empty ritual display and mindless prayer. I think it is the trusting desire for God to be God in us that can go a long way in shaping our willingness to let our practice be an opening to the Spirit’s transforming presence. I would add that such transformation provides fresh eyes not just for personal living, but also for social envisioning and action that embraces the kingdom in all dimensions of life.

**GWM:** This is an abrupt change of pace, but would you mind sharing your own rule of life?

**TE:** A rule of life to me is a personal commitment to particular ongoing ways of disposing myself to God’s ever-liberating gracious Spirit in Christ. I particularly need these habits in a dominant culture that tempts me to a soulless materialism based on a little-self-centered sense of identity that is built up by what it collects for itself. This contrasts with a life based on a deep-soul-in-God sense of identity that is realized through letting go in trust whatever has “stuck” to me, whatever I
have collected that separates me from my deep soul in God, for which my little ego-self is meant to be not an enemy but a humble vessel.

Every rule of life, I believe, is very personal to the person taking it on. And every rule of life is dynamic: it shifts over time as our life and spiritual situations evolve. For me at this point in my life, my rule includes a daily period of Scripture reading, prayer, and meditation before breakfast in my home prayer space, and a period of prayer and “examen” at the end of the day, i.e., an opening of myself to how the Spirit has been present through that day.

I also pray to be reminded of the Spirit’s opening presence throughout the day: I have a variety of ways of leaning back into that presence as I go through the day’s activities, relationships, and emotions.

I value a Eucharistic and other communal prayer/meditation/singing presence for God as these are available in Shalem and other programs I am part of and in church.

I also am committed to regular meetings with a spiritual director with whom I attend the movements of the Spirit in my life. Spiritual reading, journal keeping, charitable giving, social concern, and Sabbath times of sheer appreciation for what is given and for the Giver also are part of my rule.

I could go on, but I think these cover the most objective dimensions of my commitments at this point. Although I carry out these spiritual habits fairly steadily, I don’t ultimatize them. They are containers for my attentiveness to the Spirit, but sometimes the Spirit seems to call for something else that breaks the pattern. The rule is only a means of presence to God in my soul and the world’s soul. If the presence is given apart from the rule’s way at a given time, then that is a gift to embrace. I have noticed with myself and many other people that over the years, our rules of life loosen as we find ourselves more and more aware of the pervasiveness of the Spirit’s presence, leaving us more spontaneously available to life in the Spirit as it’s given through the day.

Like a faulty wall plug that makes the lamp go on and off unpredictably, we sometimes live attuned to the divine light, and sometimes we live unconscious of the light that Jesus declared we are.

What distinguishes a person to whom we give the title of “saint,” I think, is the perception that this person much more steadily lives from the grace at hand, lovingly given to God and particular callings in the moment.

My guess is that there are more fairly steady saints around than we think, but by their very nature they may be more anonymous and ordinary looking, so we don’t recognize them. They are at home in their deep soul in God, and they don’t need to get anything from you: approval, adoration, power, or possessions. God’s love is there for you in their presence, but it may be so unobtrusive and natural that you miss it.

Our own distracted brokenness can make it difficult to respond to what the Second Vatican Council called “the universal call to holiness.” Saints don’t serve our ego-centrality, and our dominant culture offers endless enticements to that service. Saints can be seen as real threats to what our confused little selves have come to value, unless somehow grace has begun to heal the breach between the little self and our larger nature in God’s radical love. The history of martyrdom, right back to Jesus’ death, affirms our human ambivalence to sanctity. We are often fallen away from awareness of the divine image at our core, sometimes willing to kill whatever threatens our ego security. Like a faulty wall plug that makes the lamp go on and off unpredictably, we sometimes live attuned to the divine light, and sometimes we live unconscious of the light that Jesus declared we are.

GWM: Final question—and also from left field—why is it so uncommon to meet a saint?

TE: Personal sanctity, wholeness in God, I believe for most people is something of the moment. We have graced moments of flowing with the grace at hand, living out of our deep souls in God. I think we all have such saintly moments.
confession. If you don’t mind being a priest for a moment...

In addition to your own writing, I’ve also been inspired by one of your colleagues, Gerald May. I discovered his book *Will and Spirit* while serving as an intern in clinical psychology almost 20 years ago.

Gerald’s treatment of willingness and willfulness was one of the most important things I’ve ever read. It changed the way I began to think about both clinical psychology and my own Christian faith. I rarely lecture—or talk—for more than an hour without referencing these concepts and that book.

Well, here’s the confession. In a recent edition of this journal, *Conversations,* I wrote about the true and false self in the context of willingness and willfulness. But what I didn’t do was to give an appropriate tip of the hat to Gerald May and his brilliant book *Will and Spirit.* I think I assumed that our readers would have as tight an association between “willingness/willfulness” and Gerald May as they do between “id/ego/superego” and Freud. But I was, at the very least, sloppy in not pointing to Gerald for his wonderful treatment of the spiritual significance of these two conditions of the heart.

I called him and confessed the mistake. He laughed at me for several minutes and told me to send him 10,000 dollars and forget it. But I don’t have 10,000 dollars, and I can’t forget it. So, the best I can do is confess my academic sloppiness to you and our readers. Can you help me?

**TE:** I think you need to accept the good news of forgiveness! I do honor you for your willingness to make that public confession! I’ve become aware over the years that we draw our insights from the same great well of possibilities. Intellectual property is relative to the common ground we share. However, if you ever get sloppy with some of my material and put it in a *bad* book, I might ask for 10,000 dollars, too!

**GWM:** Only in a good book! And thanks for all of your insights.

**AUTHOR NOTE:**

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