"Reading Alisa Kasmir's book felt like having a long and contemplative conversation with a close spiritual friend, while taking a long and restful walk alongside the seashore. She crosses boundaries of Jewish and Christian traditions, and her account also resonates with traditions unmentioned, like the Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic. I highly recommend this pleasant, musical, and personal read both to those working in spiritual direction, as well as for spiritual practitioners looking to share and mirror their own experiences."

—Dr. Annewieke Vroom, expert in comparative philosophy and religious diversity, lecturer at Utrecht University, the Netherlands

"This profound book writes about what is at stake in the intimate relationship and interaction of spiritual directors with those who yearn for human flourishing in uncertain and difficult times, and who seek to discern the ultimate orientation of their spiritual journey. The book calls for the spiritual director to seek simply to be there and to be available (*hineni*) for the other one in a perceptive, covenantal relationship . . . it depicts this availability to the other as a challenge and even a risk, because it requires complete connection, unconditional commitment to and vulnerability before the other, sometimes at the cost of one's own needs and knowledge—or even at being confronted with one's own helplessness and incapacity for spiritual direction."

—Pieter G.R. de Villiers, Professor of New Testament Studies University of the Free State, South Africa

"In Genesis 22, the fascinating and shocking story of Isaac's sacrifice, Abraham says *hineni* three times, 'here I am': the first time to God, the second time to his son, and the third time again to God. Alisa Kasmir names the willingness that these words express as the fundamental attitude of spiritual directors. By being open-minded and vulnerable, space is created for directors to perceive God's word in the narratives of their directees. Kasmir does not keep a monologue. Six seasoned spiritual directors affirm her argument with their own real-life experiences. Kasmir is expressive and succinct at the same time; she never loses sight of the common thread, *hineni*. Her story is inspiring and enchanting, pleasant for colleagues and for many others."

—Charles Caspers, Titus Brandsma Institute, Nijmegen

"*Hineni* is a way of seeing, of being, and of relating to the world. 'It means to say (in Hebrew) "Here I am for you, with you.'" Taking as point of departure the often puzzling, not to say shocking, midrash of Genesis 22 (Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac), and drawing on her rich religious background (Jewish, Christian, Carmelite, Benedictine), Kasmir weaves an inviting *lectio divina* to elucidate the art of spiritual direction. One will not read Genesis 22 in the same old way again. And one will view spiritual direction with a new sense of presence—to God, and to the companion on the way. The inclusion of eight personal interviews from an interreligious perspective show how *hineni* can be lived across interdenominational and interfaith lines."

—Helen Rolfson, OSF, Professor Emerita of Theology, Saint John's University School of Theology/Seminary, Collegeville, MN

"I have read many interpretations of Genesis 22—the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac. I probably suspected all that could be said had been. Then Kasmir comes at it from a fresh angle, like Emily Dickinson's 'tell all the truth, but tell it slant.' 'I will not tell you how you should or could or ought or must respond *hineni* to the one before you. Rather, I offer a mirror for your own approach,' she says. Reading Kasmir may be for you, as it is for me, not just looking in the mirror, but going through the looking glass to a new adventure."

—Patrick Henry, former executive director, Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research

# Hineni

## *In Imitation of Abraham*

Alisa Kasmir

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To Esa and Josha, my sons,
who challenge me every day to live *hineni*,
and to Becca and Pippa, my Labradors,
who show me how it's done.

# Contents

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this book. I hope that reading it will give you an idea of what it means to be present, in flesh and blood, to the mystery of another person, and about what it means to say, "Here I am for you, with you." *Hineni* is a way of seeing the world, of being in it and relating to it, and so, although this book applies theory specifically to the practice of spiritual direction, there is meaning to be found in these pages, whether you are involved in spiritual direction or not.

My first career was as a classical singer, a profession in which listening and being present are essential. The connection with spiritual direction was clear to me from the beginning. Both ask you to get out of the way and to let the music sing in you.

These days, I spend an unusual amount of time in the company of nuns. Kurt Hansen, a friend from Northwestern University, where we both studied music and sang in the chapel choir, sent a book one Christmas: Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk*. It made me curious enough to fly in from the Netherlands for a visit. The Benedictine sisters in St. Joseph, Minnesota, live and model the kind of presence I write about. They call it "listening with the ear of the heart."

My dogs also act as living examples of *hineni*. The Netherlands is a great place to live if you love dogs. Dogs are welcome in most places—restaurants, stores, public transportation, schools—you get the idea. They can, in turn, be counted on to be well-behaved and socialized. It's a win-win situation.

It works well for me. My Labradors and I have been walking around town for over twenty years now. We have been stopped to talk so often on the streets of Kralingen, the part of Rotterdam where we live, that being stopped became hard to dismiss or ignore. Behind the narratives, people are telling us that they want to be seen. They want to matter. They want a friendly face to receive their stories. They are the real reason that first Becca, and now Pippa and I walk to the stores. Those who shared their concerns, pain, and questions were, I believe, showing me who I am, and calling me to spiritual direction.

*In Imitation of Abraham*, the subtitle, might make you wonder what is being imitated. Partly, it is an intended play on Thomas à Kempis's *De Imitatione Christi.* Just as he did not suggest that we become carbon copies of Jesus, but that we find the resonance, the universality in Jesus' example, and make it particular again in ourselves, imitating Abraham does not mean offering one of your children as a sacrifice. I offer a perspective on the Abraham and Isaac paradigm, as told in Genesis 22, based on the response, *"Hineni."* See what resonates in you, what of it you might make your own.

Ultimately, to say *hineni* is to learn something about your relationship with God and others, how you see God in the one before you, and about who you are in your core. Are you ready? As we used to say when singing through a particularly challenging score, I'll meet you at the double-bar line.

Warm greetings,
Alisa

# Acknowledgments

Many people have lived *hineni* to me during the writing of this book. Without them, I would not have been able to do it. I thank them for being willing, open, and receptive in the moment (in some cases, an awful lot of moments) to this one before them.

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# Introduction

## More than Just Showing Up

The question at the heart of spiritual direction is how to meet the mystery of the other. *Hineni* is not an answer to the mystery. It is a response to the challenge, a response from the space where mystery and oneness meet. *Hineni*, "here I am," means much more than just showing up.[1]

My experience of spiritual work with people in both formal and informal settings affirms my intuition that, in the depth of their beings, people do not want advice or answers. They do not want to be repaired or fixed. They want to matter, to be seen. They want someone to witness their story, to bear with them, to bear it with them. A spiritual director listens for the story behind their story—God's story unfolding in them—and lifts it so that it can be seen and heard and made more visible to them.

This is true for homeless people and people living with dementia, as well as priests and poets and baronesses. It is true for people of faith and people who say they have none. Spiritual direction responds to the question, "*Ayekah*? Are you there for me?" by listening with the ear of the heart, like the Benedictines, by being open, willing, and receptive. By saying, "*Hineni*."

"There is no good English equivalent for the Hebrew '*hineni*,'" says *The Jewish Study Bible*. "The term indicates readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instruction."[2] The definition stresses readiness to respond rather than control. The verb "indicates" is directional. It is the "direction" of spiritual direction: *toward*. Spiritual directors serve as instruments or vessels, making space for the directee to become.

*Hineni* as a response, let alone a way of life, is an ideal. The ideal stands in tension with our lived reality, which is bound to fall short. It is just not possible to maintain presence to everyone and everything all the time. Still, we can catch glimpses of the ideal, in moments that tend to defy words, moments that reveal something undeniable in the now and pull us toward the horizon of that ideal.

*Hineni* happens—it is. It is a state of being in relation to things not yet known, so it cannot be set in stone. In a sense, we cannot be exploring what we are exploring. When something is written, it is nailed down. It is *this* and therefore not *that*. But what we are trying to speak about is

in the cracks.[3] In an attempt to grasp something that is not apprehendable, we dissect and objectify. The very thing that is essential for relationship—separateness—also divides. It makes distinctions and definitions.[4] Grasping the reality of *hineni*—its mystery—from the inside is not possible.

And yet we have to agree upon what we are talking about. I have defined *hineni* as *an open, willing receptiveness in the moment to the mystery of the one before you, based on the fundamental oneness underneath all relationship. It is both awareness and embodiment of connection and commitment.*

The definition reveals complementary and sometimes paradoxical pairs: mystery and oneness, awareness and embodiment, connection and commitment (from covenant for humanity), open to receive, directional and in the moment (being and becoming). Holding, rather than resolving, the paradoxes central to *hineni* is crucial to the spiritual direction encounter.

*Hineni* begins with standing before the unknowable mystery of the other, acknowledging that, no matter how well you think you know a person, the one before you is a godly mystery. His or her otherness and the chasm that separates you make him or her a mystery, but also essential for relationship. In that in between space of holy reverence, the other invites you to look over his or her shoulder at what he or she sees. As spiritual directors, that is what we do: we help the other explore his or her path as we both look out toward his or her ultimate orientation.

The best we can do with the mystery of the other starts here, with going beyond our version of reality. What is then revealed is not the mystery itself, but that there is that mystery and it is beyond our grasp. Director and directee are looking for and at that which is beyond them both.

At the same time, *hineni* comes from, and acknowledges, a sense of connectedness beyond separation, a connectedness that Sister Jonathan Herda sensed when she strode into the hallway of St. Scholastica's Monastery, proclaiming, "The God in me wants to meet the God in you." It is the sense conveyed in this stanza from the poem "Islands" by Muriel Rukeyser: "O for God's sake / they are connected / underneath."[5]

## We're Talking about Mysticism

Lawrence Kushner defines a mystic as "anyone who has the gnawing suspicion that the apparent discord, brokenness, contradictions, and discontinuities that assault us every day might conceal a hidden unity."[6] That sense is simply conveyed in this old Hassidic story:

> In the beginning there was only the Holy Darkness, the source of life. The world and everything in it came from the heart of this Holy Darkness as a great ray of light. And then there was an accident. And the vessel containing the light of the world broke. And fragments of that light fell

> into all events and all things and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day. We are all born with the capacity to find the hidden light in everything. It is our task to lift it up and make it visible once again.[7]

A spiritual director is trained in lifting the shard, so that the other might discover his or her hidden light.

The how of being there for the other is inherent to the moment of asking, as it was for the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France, who—despite raids, arrests, internment, threats, and even executions—hid Jews during World War II. Thousands of Jews—many of them children—were saved by this town.

When interviewed years later about the reasons for their actions, the villagers consistently did not understand the question. "Who else would have taken care of them if we did not? . . . We were doing what had to be done . . . what has that to do with goodness?"[8] For them, there was no why. There was only seeing what was before them, being moved, and responding.

*Hineni* cannot be made, or planned, any more than God can be controlled or summoned at our will. It is not an act of will, but an attitude of willingness. "Willingness implies a surrender of one's self-separateness, and entering into an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participation in that process."[9]

## It's Personal—Singing as a Metaphor for *Hineni*

*Hineni* is, of course, personal. For me, it is an extension of my life as a singer.

A singer needs presence in order to function well in the job. The kind of presence needed for singing is a good metaphor for the spiritual direction relationship.

The singer needs to be present to the music and to fellow musicians. To be present to them all requires a very attentive sort of listening, in order for the music to be together and so that there is a balance of volume, colors, and sounds. This give-and-take relationship is, at its best moments, seamless: from many individual musicians, a transcendent oneness can emerge.

The audience is also part of the give and take. There are times when the music is flowing and people are somehow open to listening, and their listening adds something, too. The whole winds up being greater than the sum of the parts.

In order to sing, there must be space for resonance. A singer is basically a wind instrument. If you just blow between two vocal chords that vibrate, however, the result is unpleasant. The notes need to resonate in the spaces of the singer's body in order to have the color and the overtones that make sounds beautiful. If the spaces are filled in, the sound distorts.

To be present to the music means practice: scales and other vocal exercises so that the singer's voice is up to singing the music. In addition to practice, it helps to study—not just the notes, but the history and theory of music, which

help the singer relate to a particular score. All of this work is important. It is part of honoring the musical gift that is present in the singer. But it is not the music.

Making music that touches the listener is more than a pretty voice and training. In a vulnerable paradox, the singer has to get out of the way and let the music sing in her. When the singer steps out onto the stage, she must forget technique, while using it at the same time. In order for there to be music, the singer has to be there. She has to sing. No singer, no music.

And yet, if there is too much self, if she gets in the way of letting the music sing through her, the performance winds up being forced or tedious. As the children's song "The Hokey Pokey" says, "You put your whole self in, you take your whole self out . . . that's what it's all about."

Mrs. R was in the day room, in a wheelchair, writhing in pain when I arrived one afternoon. It looked like she was having labor contractions. Her face was contorted. The nurses explained that she was barely conscious and unable to move. Would I sit with her? I pulled up a chair and took her hand. Was she holding my hand in return, or was what I felt part of the constant spasms racking her body? I don't know. It seemed she was in horrible, unimaginable pain and I felt helpless beside her. I stroked her cheek and her hair, and then something in me prompted me to sing: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," "Deep River," "There Is a Balm in Gilead." The spasms seemed to lessen. I kept going for almost an hour, occasionally stopping to ask if she wanted

more. Each time, her eyes locked with mine and urged me on. Slowly, her grip on my hand eased, and then her eyes seemed to say, "Enough." She relaxed a bit into her chair and closed her eyes. She died a few days later.

Singing all those years was training in being an instrument. It was training in being "a reed in the hand of God, to maintain a purposeful emptiness that receives the piper's breath and sings the song that is in his heart."[10] That is the core of singing. It is the core of spiritual direction. And it is the core of *hineni*.

## What This Book Is Doing

In the chapters that follow, textual analysis of a paradigmatic Bible passage combines with stories and the lived experiences of a few seasoned veterans in the field, revealing the contemporary practical relevance to spiritual direction behind and beyond the larger-than-life but very real and full-of-life Abraham.

It has been said that the Bible is a book in which every story is about us. So I will examine Genesis 22 and see how it is about us, what in it resonates, what it tells us about what it is to be there for the other in relationship. The story shows that *hineni* is not always pretty and can, in fact, leave us feeling decidedly displaced.

Chapter 1 will focus on what it meant for Abraham to say *hineni*. *Lectio divina* with the text will yield Abraham's

model through the paradoxical pairs. For the exploration of Genesis 22, a variety of commentaries and literary sources were consulted.

The focus on *hineni,* as a response to the mystery before us, means that the seminal works on Genesis 22 by Emmanuel Levinas and Søren Kierkegaard, while they provide valuable insights, are not central to my arguments.

*Hineni can* be, as Levinas suggests, a response in ethical responsibility to the face before us, a responsibility that presupposes a response, or ethics as the ultimate or universal. *Hineni can* be, as in Kierkegaard, the teleological suspension of ethics in the name of an absolute relationship. Both claim fundamental relationships, though the "with whom" differs. For purposes of this book, it is not important which relationship is fundamental, but, rather, *that* there is a fundamental relationship from which *hineni* is said. Neither "why" is, in the end, my point. What we are "imitating" is unique to the moment, and so, inimitable.

Chapter 2 looks at the implications of the Genesis story for spiritual direction. It responds to the questions, "What do Abraham's *hinenis* reveal to spiritual directors?" and "How do the paradoxical pairs as concepts apply to us?" These concepts are not meant to be left as theory, but to affect, or challenge, how we as spiritual directors interpret our practices.

The concepts led to the development of a questionnaire. The responses form the body of chapter 3. The meaning of *hineni* in the real-life experiences of the seasoned spiritual

directors who responded is recounted in narrative. The collected wisdom will show eight unique ways of *hineni*, of making the Name, in imitation of Abraham.

Chapter 4 looks at both the particular—Abraham's and mine—and the universal implications of *hineni* for spiritual direction and for the journey of the reader, of all that has been discussed. I will not tell you how you should or could or ought or must respond *hineni* to the one before you. Rather, I offer a mirror for your own approach.

# II

# *Hineni:* Making the Name and the Practice of Spiritual Direction

Abraham's story is not meant as a literal recounting of one man's life four millennia ago. The story is a myth: a grand narrative that expresses common human experience. Myth is not false; rather, it encapsulates truth about subjects that cannot be perceived fully through reason alone.[1]

What does *hineni* mean for us today, especially (but not exclusively) within the spiritual direction relationship?

## The Business of the Words

William Stafford's poem is, in one way, as disturbing as is Genesis 22. His extreme images of the utter lack of control and unpredictability of that which shapes us lead me to a confrontational question regarding spiritual direction, the one I am afraid to ask, "What have I started here?"

Brueggemann says the question about "What kind of God?" must "not be explained, for it will not be explained." If we forgo explanation, we are led to the reality that God is God. Can we be prepared to meet such a radical God? Brueggemann notes that there are times when it is seductively attractive to find an easier, less demanding alternative to God.[2] We are warned.

And yet, spiritual direction is about seeking the business of the words, God's story in the other. That would seem to preclude the easier way. It would be "yes" to the way that leads through possible Armageddon or sunshine, toward becoming and in being, where we are set free. One thing is clear—we have no idea what we have said yes to.

## We Have No Idea What We Have Said "Yes" To

In order to give a sense of what that can mean, I offer the following example, compiled from years of spiritual direction correspondence generously made available to me.

Sister M. has been a Carmelite for seventy-one of her ninety-four years. To describe her journey as humble, authentic, is an understatement.

Monastics sometimes refer to themselves as professional seekers of God. For Sister M., seeking with all her heart, which is the "yes," has become a severe grace.

In a way, her journey has imitated Abraham's. From a life that once seemed led by experiences of God working in her, and a deep assurance of God's love for her, she lives now, as she has lived for over thirty-five years, with the sense that God is essentially absent from her life. Her lived reality does not feel like *hineni*. It feels like God does not see her at all. What in Abraham has been retrospectively interpreted here as *tzimtzum*, feels to Sister M. like rejection, failure and abandonment, engendering fear and doubt.

How do you have a relationship with your heart's desire, when old, comforting images and illusions of God have fallen away and there is nothing to replace them, while at the same time it becomes clear that nothing but your heart's desire will satisfy?

The problem, as Sister M. notes, is that you cannot have God. God is "No Thing," and you cannot possess what is not. If even the child you bore is not yours to have, how can God possibly be? Slowly, the realization grows that what you have said "yes" to, what you have devoted your whole life to and that which is the desire of your heart, you cannot ever "have." So it seems that Sister M. is living

a fundamental, perhaps *the* fundamental paradox at the heart of the spiritual life.

She has tried to make sense of it, but God does not make sense, so seeking purpose in suffering no longer comforts. Seeking solace within the familiarity of religious terminology no longer consoles. There is not much to cling to. And then surrender (which always takes place after a struggle when holding on no longer works), in which there is theoretically "more" God in you, feels to her like there is less. The more she seems to surrender, the worse she feels, because she sees there is ever more to surrender. She describes feeling powerless, being powerless to love and be loved.

Sister M. clearly recalls her moment of "yes": "The crucified Christ became alive to me, though I did not see him with my eyes. He asked me if I wanted to be transformed. He gave the answer: 'yes,' while I said a wordless 'yes' with my whole being. Sometimes I dare hope that my current situation has something to do with that promise way back in 1948, a promise I have never been able to forget."

Even though the image of Jesus crucified could have been a hint of what was to come, the full reality of the journey cannot be imagined at its onset. Who would ever say "yes," knowing that "yes" leads to the cross?

And yet. Something Bob Gay, an opera professor at Northwestern University for a quarter of a century, used to say to young singers seems to address this question: "If I had told you that following your heart would be this hard, you wouldn't have believed me."

"What I miss," Sister M. writes, "is not so much the inability to experience God, but the inability even to experience my own increasing surrendering into ever more nothing so that perhaps I could be of service to what God wishes to do in me. There is more, but words fail me. (Yet) in the depth of my depth, God is."

It is not that there is no hope or joy in Sister M.'s life, or that her whole life is darkness. She still knows what she calls "happiness in God." It is just not the only truth.

You might think that being in community would provide understanding and consolation for Sister M. But hers is a reality no one around her knows from the inside, and so it is a lonely place to be. Maybe it's a bit like living in the stripped-down reality of dementia. Those outside of your reality have no point of reference for what it is, yet at the same time they fear it and keep it at a distance so they can go about their ordinary religious lives. Maybe it's the monastic equivalent of a parent losing a child.

Her reality does not prevent her from noting with admiration when others are being loving and kind and helpful. It's just that she also sees that there is much busyness with and satisfaction in things that, from her perspective, are not the heart's true desire, and so are "nothing."

Prayer—in the sense of turning to God, which necessitates seeing the self as separate from God in order to be able to turn to God—is hard. When she is taken up in the silence where all is one, and she "is" no longer, then all is prayer. And yet, she is part of a monastic community, where prayers are central.

"God is too big," and yet the word "God" doesn't mean anything anymore. Sister M. wonders if any of what she was taught to believe in is true. She often feels herself without ground under her feet. "Former ways of having been 'destroyed' were child's play. My current situation, which leads nowhere, only gets worse. That is how I experience it. It is hopeless." Longing has long ago been replaced by emptiness. Love? She is not sure what that is anymore.

And yet, Sister M. does not give up. Perhaps because she says she has nothing to look forward to and questions the truth or value of what she looks back on, "yes," in the moment, to the moment, might literally be all there is. And so, each evening, before going to sleep, conscious of a fundamental inadequacy in God's overwhelming presence, she ends her day with the words, "Here I am." *Hineni*.

"It could, you know. No guarantees in this life."[3]

## Awareness and Embodiment

Saying *hineni* to the one before me is, at first, a response to an interruption. To hearing the click. *Ayekah*, where are you, breaks into my understanding of reality by the intrusion of someone else.[4] Henri Nouwen once observed, "My whole life I have complained that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work."[5]

As previously noted, the one before me, interrupting by his or her call, *ayekah*, calls me into being in relationship.

Boundaries are clear and help Peter maintain presence. Sessions take place in his home and are limited to a maximum of two hours. No calls after 9:00 p.m., and he prefers to keep his personal life personal. Perhaps most importantly, the directee must take responsibility for his or her own journey, must not become dependent on the director, so that the director "does not become overburdened or drained." Signs of dependence include often asking for advice or excessive contact between sessions. "Spiritual direction should increase the independence" of the directee.

Finally, Peter feels that a pastor must always be ready to put his other work aside when someone calls out in need, "Like a monastic learns to stop his work immediately when the bell rings for prayer. . . . It is surprising how unimportant important things actually are in the light of someone else's concerns. Being open teaches you to see the relativity of many things."

## Responding in God: Jana Preble

*Jana is a spiritual director, professor emerita of psychology, consultant, Benedictine oblate, wife, mother, and grandmother. She has over fifty years of experience as a spiritual director and is a welcome asset to the Benedictine—and wider—community that she serves. Her research included assisting Viktor Frankl and Elisabeth Lukas by extending logotherapy research from Europe to include North American studies.*

"Presence . . . is the fundamental offering of the director to the directee—to be mindful and open and receptive to the mystery of God within and surrounding both of us. It is the heart of the relationship. . . . Presence does not so much play a role; rather, it embodies the reality of God's presence already given." Jana describes presence as a core mutuality in the direction relationship. As she offers presence, she is "filled with wonder at God's presence revealed" in the one before her.

Jana *practices* presence. Connection is embodied in every aspect of her life: in prayer; with her family, friends, and directees; in the sacraments, songs, and community; in nature, listening, reading, holding hands, and gazing into another's eyes. Faithfulness to practices—prayer, *lectio divina*, contemplative practice—as well as balance between work and leisure, with adequate time for quiet and social engagement, help her maintain presence and balance. She considers these helps "foundational to my being." Without them, she notes, she becomes "fatigued, distracted, agitated or (rarely) bored."

While awareness of connection is central for Jana, she admits that "being attentive to God is a full-time commitment that is sometimes poorly realized. Since God is in every event, in every place, in every person and creature, one's mind invariably wanders from the source at times. I think we are meant to be distracted by all of these and not meant to *think* about God so much as to *respond in* God."

In a session, Jana is rarely distracted. Her attention is focused in two places at once: "on the directee—on every

aspect—mind, body, emotion, eyes," and on "God's love for them, God's work in their lives. My attention is focused (in these ways) because my undying stance is that God the Holy Spirit is the Director. I am an attendant."

Although Jana is not easily distracted, "interruptions have been a way of life for me since childhood. Generally, they arrive as a surprise at times when life seems to be peaceful and absorbing. Many have been life-changing. Whether I have been initially open or not, the interruptions ultimately seem to have their way."

An "interruption" moved her from her peaceful domestic life, which included informal spiritual companionship to those who sought her out, to the professional role she still enjoys today. Her husband, an Episcopal priest, brought her a brochure describing a study in Christian spirituality. Despite her initial protests, he persisted. "The interruption of a small brochure, a big nudge from my husband and the Holy Spirit combined to form a life that continues to move forward in ways I cannot predict." The surprise element has not faded. "Unexpected and inconvenient interruptions arriving daily can be full of fruitful potential."

Still, there are times when Jana does not feel like opening the door to an unexpected caller.

"If the resistance prevails, I sometimes feel disappointed in myself, sorry for my lack of openness. At other times, I realize that sometimes, resistance is necessary so that I can recover from too many activities or too much engagement. The question is, when is the closed door necessary so that

I can regain perspective enough to be open, and when is it simply stubborn selfishness?"

Jana has "a strong conviction that God is love and that God loves this person no matter what. I trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance—for both of us."

"Quiet receptivity allows openness and space; an invitation for whatever the directee might bring." The conviction that God is love and loves the directee unconditionally "gives me the confidence to offer reassurance of that love repeatedly. Patience allows me to wait for whatever the directee may bring to be revealed. Spiritual direction is a process, a journey. I've never regretted being patient, but I can be and need to be assertive, too, at times."

Encouragement sometimes complements her willingness to wait, and "listening is most of what I do. I listen to the person; I listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit." Jana feels that this guidance is her constant companion. The gifts of the Holy Spirit "act as touchstones or indicators" of what she watches for in a directee. In addition, body language and facial expression are keys in her understanding of emotional content.

Openness means vulnerability. Sometimes, this means feeling sorry as Jana sees a directee make what she feels to be a destructive choice for him- or herself. As difficult as it is, her boundaries make clear that the choice is the directee's to make, not hers.

Jana is in the position of being a spiritual director to people in the community she worships with, so rigid boundaries are

neither possible nor advisable. Usually, her directees know her "to some degree before they choose to come for spiritual direction." Still, the session is the session: prayer, quiet, openness and privacy set the boundaries. She is clear that directees should leave matters of spiritual direction for sessions, rather than bring them into outside encounters with her. Some of her directees are themselves directors, so "this kind of fluid relationship does not pose a problem."

"The boundaries of the session open the door for the directee to speak of anything at all that is on their heart. Sometimes encountering directees within the context of their lives is a help to being present to them in a session." Still, Jana is careful to keep her responses in a session to what the directee is saying in the here and now: "Here we are together in this relationship; what you bring at this time is what I want to receive."

Jana knows the shadow side of presence. "It is God whom I rely on for me to be attentive in whatever manner of being I bring to the moments of life. Attentiveness is God's action and gift, too—hanging on to control of attention is not always the way of loving attentiveness."

Time and spontaneity are sacrifices Jana is aware of making in order to serve in the way she does.

"I often relinquish my preferred daily schedule in order to fit my directees' needs. I give up time that I would enjoy spending in other ways even though I enjoy spiritual direction and directees. The giving up of time is the largest sacrifice, together with the consequent missing of other events/

opportunities/joys that I am not available for when I have spiritual direction appointments. Spontaneous availability is sacrificed to the schedule of appointments."

"Sometimes," Jana observes, "people are so caught up in the myriad details of living that they wonder where God is in all of it. This is human, I think, normal for most. People have been attentive to God for me and I am grateful. For others, it depends on each person—one way doesn't work for all. But it always comes down to love—drawing on the awareness of the gifts of love."

## God's Story in Them: Hein Blommestijn, OCarm

*Hein is a Carmelite and Catholic priest. He holds degrees in psychology and spirituality and has been a professor of mystical theology. He is a writer and academic researcher in the fields of mysticism and spirituality. He has been a spiritual director for "50 years more or less." At the Titus Brandsma Institute, Hein's lectures were characterized by a sense of presence, conveying something beyond the content.*

"Even if the person in front of me seems understandable, this is only a projection. Therefore, there is no real difference between the person who tells a 'rational story' and the person who speaks in a very enigmatic or even strange way. In both cases, I will have to listen to the person 'behind' the obviously present person."

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