

Attending to *authority* in our spiritual direction conversations

ACSD TRAINING EVENT
AUGUST 2015



‘Cultivating sensitivity to power dynamics
in spiritual direction relationships as we support
directees in the co-authoring of their stories with
God.’

Two assumptions:

- ‘Power dynamics’ exist in SD relationships
- ‘Co-authoring’ occurs in SD conversations

Authority issues in spiritual direction

Barry & Connolly (2009: 128) are optimistic:

A spiritual director is 'first of all a brother or a sister of the directee' in an 'informal, nonhierarchical—"just two people talking"—but creative atmosphere'.

Jeanette Bakke (2000: 251-252)

Psychological perspective on power issues:

E.g. Danger of directee 'substituting the director for God', or 'copying the spiritual director's journey' → surrendering own authority

Bakke advocates *interdependency*—directees trusting their directors to be willing to hear God *with* them, rather than *for* them.

Brainstorm in small groups ...

In the course of spiritual direction relationships and conversations, where might imbalances of power/authority be most likely to occur?

Note:

Focus on the SD relationship itself, not on other power issues the directee wants to bring to SD.

Spiritual direction as a narrative process

Narratives usually have a beginning, middle and end - a storyline which helps to impart a sense of continuity and meaning to our lives.

We tell stories (to ourselves and others) as a way of making meaning of our lives and identities.

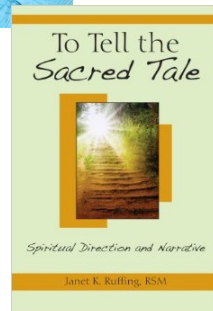
Life/identity may be storied in many different ways.

E.g. according to what I do, *or* via my whakapapa

‘How am I doing?’ *or* ‘Whose am I?’

‘I am a hopeless teacher’ *or* ‘I am the beloved’

Spiritual direction as a narrative process



‘When we hear ourselves tell our own sacred tales, we discover more clearly what God’s desires are for us and ours for God’ (ix).

‘Whatever else spiritual direction involves, it is fundamentally a narrative activity’ (21).

As we tell and re-tell our stories in SD ...

- We reconnect with our experience and its effects on us.
- We make fresh meanings of our experience.
- Our views of God, ourselves and others are shaped.
- We come to discern which story/stories to indwell and develop creatively in our lives.

It is our stories
 our sacred, chaotic, blessed stories,
 our lonely, peaceful, frightened stories,
 our awe-drenched, doubting, joyous stories;
 it is our stories
 that are the stones
 of God's language
 on the rocky, jagged, radiant
 path of life.
 It is the holy listener
 who helps to arrange these stones
 into cairns
 which point the way to
 God's desire for our lives
 and
 God's desire for our every moment.
 The cairns, if patiently balanced,
 uneven though they be,
 if patiently balanced,
 by the two who gather in God's presence,
 if patiently balanced,
 can point the way to heaven.
 Heaven, after all,
 is making God-serving meaning
 of our stories
 on this rocky, jagged, radiant
 path of life.

Our Stories

by Jennifer Hoffman
Listen, 3.1 (Jan 2009)



Power?

‘Heaven, after all,
 is making God-serving meaning of our stories’

‘It is the holy listener
 who helps arrange these stones ...’

‘We ... engage in a hermeneutical process; that is,
 understanding and interpreting that narrative
 together with the directee’ (Ruffing, 21-22).

‘The director’s response to the directee’s stories
 profoundly affects the directee’s narratives’
 (Ruffing, 2).

Directees may defer to greater knowledge/experience of their directors.



Our aim: that increasingly directees be able to claim their own authority.



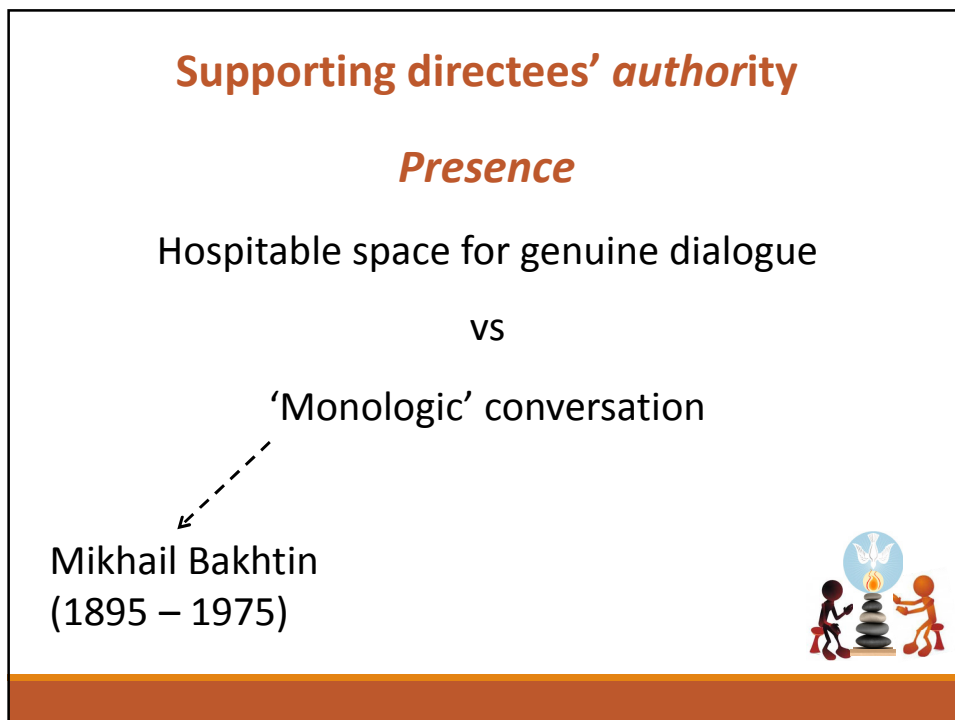
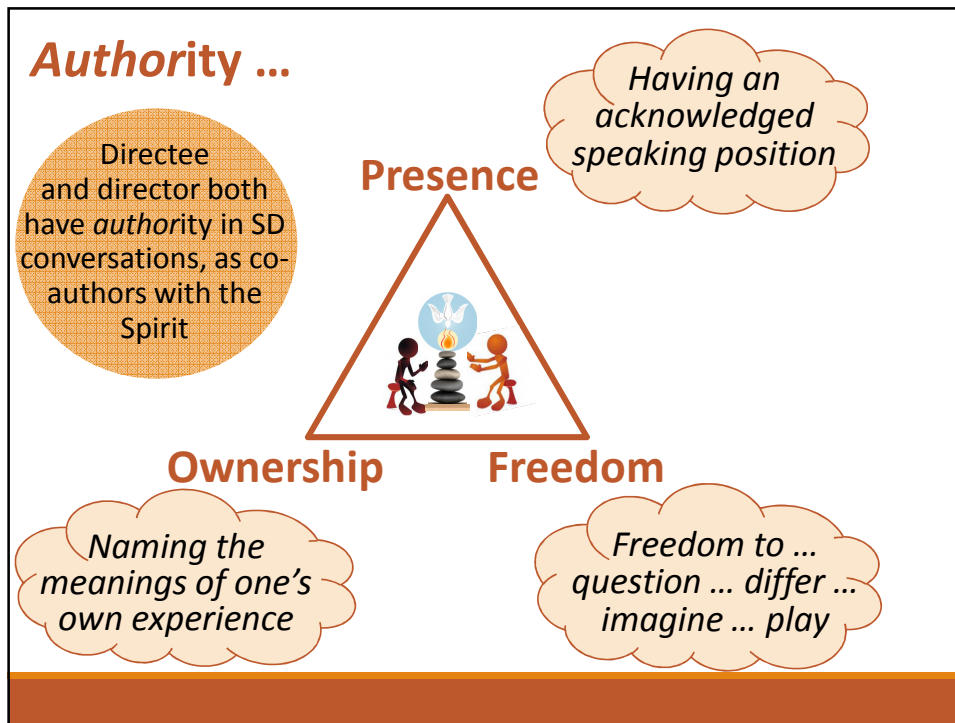
What emerges from dialogue will be 'something new that belongs to neither partner alone – shared meaning.'
(Ruffing, 47)



Authority as *authority* (*author-ity*)

To have *authority* is to participate fully and freely in the interplay of divine and human voices from which one's own stories emerge.





- Doing the basics well - attending to directees' language, open/naïve questions, etc.
- Avoiding the 'expert' position.
- Going beyond listening / reflecting / tentativeness—humbly and transparently offering *our* own presence in dialogical spirit.

'So—impossibly—I need you to be an eye and an ear, an outstretched hand, a mouth for the gospel of God, a sponge, a sounding-board, a mirror, a Bible' (Seddon: 2011, 53).



Supporting directees' *authority*

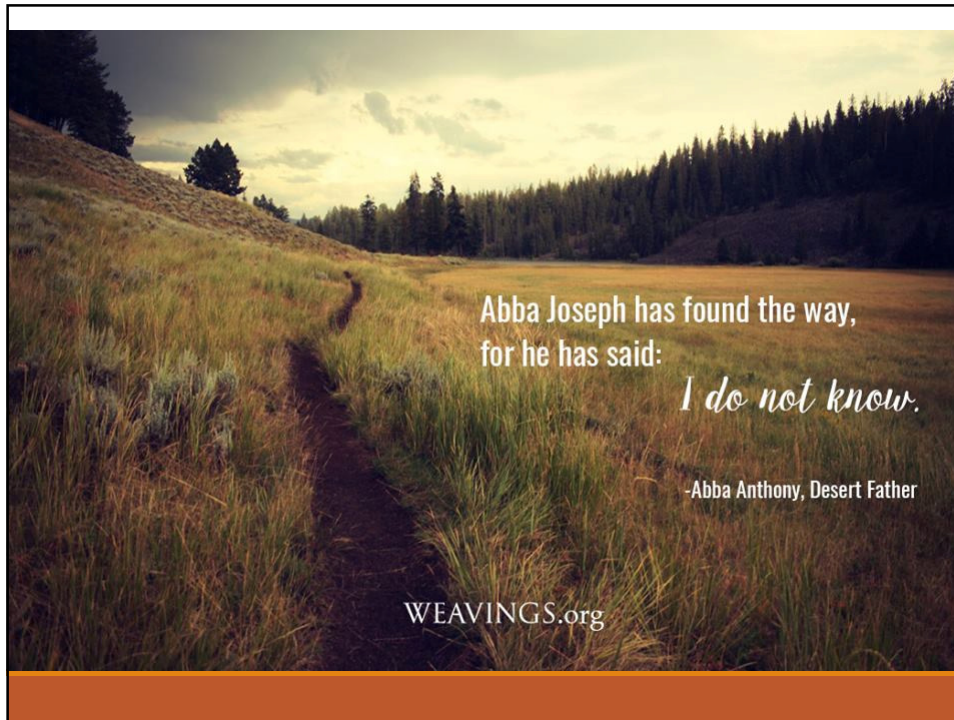
Ownership

'Internally persuasive' meanings

vs

'Authoritative' interventions





- Accepting that not all our offerings will become internally persuasive for our directees!
- Holding our knowing with humility, willing to let go and trust in the divine director. We are simply 'friends of the bridegroom'. (Whew!)
- Discerning when a directee's sense of self is fragile and trust in their own meaning-making capacity is low—nurturing their *authority*.
- On *rare* occasions, an authoritative (non-negotiable) intervention may be appropriate.



Supporting directees' *authority*

Freedom

Open and loving attentiveness

vs

'Finalising' assumptions



- Ideally SD conversation '*opens up* greater theological insight, loving *possibilities* for action, and mystical deepening that is *unique* for each directee' (Ruffing, 209, emphasis added).
- Supporting directees to freely ...
 - reconsider old certainties/explore new possibilities
 - engage with creative possibilities and practices
'Play has a real place in the serious work of spiritual direction' (Guenther, 60)
 - respond to the playful movements of the Spirit.
- Avoiding 'finalising' assumptions, e.g. based on psychological theory, dogma, gender, etc.
'The person sitting opposite me is always a mystery. When I label, I limit' (Guenther, 19)

