

Joining the Dots

SLIDE 1 TITLE

SLIDE 2 - dots puzzle

Welcome to Joining the Dots: I'm Fran Francis. And I'm delighted, honoured and slightly freaked out to be presenting to you today. Thanks for coming, guys!

A little bit about me - I've been in Christian ministry for 25 years co-pastoring two Vineyard churches with my husband on Aucklands' North Shore. I have 4 adult children one of whom lives here in Welly so I'm especially delighted to be here :) All of them are creative and 3 out of 4 are in creative work. And, joy of joys, I'm a spiritual director working with my dear friend and partner in crime Kris Telfer in our own spiritual direction practice called Solace. We madly and happily write and create things that people seem to love to come to. Other peoples' material isn't really our jam. We cook up our own. I am creative. I'm a writer. I also love to curate - collecting, editing and presenting objects, items and ideas in ways that help people connect with them. My father is an artist, my mother created a family - a miracle considering her broken background, and in the beautiful celebrations, lovely rooms, the clothes she made us, the cakes she decorated -she created a wonderful, interesting home for our family: my sister is a food-writer with 10 titles to her name which means she created a lot of truly horrible meals before creating a recipe worth publishing! I'm an ENFP. An Enneagram 7. I could be your worst nightmare in a spiritual direction session! After this workshop you'll need a cuppa and a lie-down!

So - Joining the dots - I used to enjoy dot-to-dot picture puzzles when I was little. It was as close to maths as I ever got! That process of discovery to link the numbered dots and see, with surprise, Oh! A man with a beard! Any adult would recognise the shape right away, from their perspective it was obvious but it wasn't from mine.

"Joining the dots" is part of our adult vernacular meaning "to associate one [idea](#) with another, to find the "big picture", or salient feature, in a mass of data. So in spiritual direction when a directee brings something creative or even a dream we work together with them finding the linking points in what they have brought so the image or truth God wants them to see and experience is revealed. We help them "join the dots".

As Spiritual directors we have the privileged opportunity to gaze with our directee at aspects of their life with God and see what they see, and if they are struggling to see we are there to help unveil the mystery with our questions and our presence. This is what I have called "joining the dots". In this session we are going to look at spiritual direction and creativity - how we work with what creative directees bring to their direction sessions and how making stuff connects us to God.

SLIDE 3 SHAVING PIC

I recently went to the retrospective of NZ artist Billy Apple. This photo marks a moment that transforms his life. Billy was fresh off the boat in Spain. He came across this scene in a little barber shop in Alicante. He was captivated by the painterly strokes, the deep concentration, attention and artistry of the barber as he lathered this man's face for a shave. Billy Apple was utterly convinced in this moment that "art is already embedded in life" and he is right.

Many of us don't consider ourselves artists - it seems presumptuous especially in Tall Poppy Land. But it is not news to *us* as Christians that art is already embedded in life. Or is it? I think it's one of those truths that's cognitively assented to but operatively unexperienced until there's a moment of illumination or encounter with it. And if art is already embedded in life so is theology. God is waiting for us, speaking to us as Richard Rohr says, "all the time, what is lacking is awareness." "All the earth's on fire and every bush aflame with the glory of God but only those who see take off their shoes, the rest sit round and pick blackberries."

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection with his simplicity and awareness of the sacredness of everyday things still has so much to say to us in this busy and distracted age. Gratitude is a key to connecting with art in our own lives. Taking time to be thankful and aware of the moment we are in awakens our senses and this is where the “dots” begin to appear.

SLIDE 4 HOT CROSS BUNS

An everyday example from my life - every easter I make hot cross buns but this easter as I was making hot cross buns I had an experience I found deeply touching right in the middle of the baking process. I'd been thinking about the myrrh-bearing women who went to the tomb to anoint the body of the Lord. And as I sprinkled the spices and worked them into the dough that thought returned. I stayed with it, smelling the spices, allowing thoughts to arise as I kneaded the warm, living dough. I felt the physicality of it. I thought about the violence the unresisting flesh of Jesus absorbed and felt very connected to him as a vulnerable humanity and fleshiness. I then left the dough in the warm dark of the cupboard to ... what? To rise! As I punched down the dough and drew my cook's knife ready to slice the unresisting dough into 12 portions I found myself reluctant to make the cut. I have to do this to get the buns. I reminded myself the dough would rise again! Marking each little ball of dough with it's own cross became an act of worship and glazing them felt like anointing. The One had become 12 which was going to feed and fuel others. The Divine Mystery was unfolding at my kitchen bench. It's not only art that is embedded in life, but truth.

We know that contemplation draws us to gaze on everyday things and really see them, perhaps see them as TS Eliot says, “for the first time”.

I came to realise as I prepared for this workshop that as much as we are talking about creative directees and what they bring to spiritual direction and what helps them express their encounter with God we are also talking about kataphatic spirituality.

When I first came to spiritual direction I had no idea what the kataphatic and apophatic pathways were. In the process of getting to know me and my experience of God my director enquired along the lines of kataphatic and apophatic spirituality while it may not be said overtly the inference and accepted wisdom is that the way of negation and the apophatic path are there for those who are truly more mature in their faith. Well, thank God for Janet Ruffing I say! Her extensive research in this area shows that this is quite a recent view and that in the Middle Ages both paths were considered equally deep and good. It's not often in modern life you want to be agreeing with those recently emerged from the Dark Ages but there you have it. I'm with them on this!

SLIDE 5 RUFFING QUOTE “KATAPHATIC EXPERIENCE”

“Kataphatic experience is relegated to the beginnings of the spiritual journey - a mere prelude to the real, true or most authentic spiritual experience which is then defined along apophatic lines.”

While there may have been up till now somewhat of a bias towards emphasising the apophatic experience it's interesting to note that post-moderns and millennials (those born since 2000) have a real appreciation for symbols, stories, imagination and embodiment. In this age of technology, digital design, artificial intelligence, ready-made food and clothes, online shopping and all that stuff the connection with nature, with ourselves, with our inner life, our own imagination, the thing we made with our own hands - these things have more value and meaning than ever before.

It's good to remember that when we suggest people bring “handwork” to a retreat that many younger people don't have any idea what that is. They don't do jigsaws, or knit - they play games on their smartphones. Participants who attend retreats led by me and my colleague Kris always

receive a suggested creative activity on the hand-out. We realised that lots of people are intimidated by art materials and don't know what to do with them. We help them by telling them what they could try if they want to...we help them connect with their shadow, and what seems really important here is we get them into their "right mind." By giving them the means to create something, to make it, to write it, to go and find it we are helping them cross from their logical, linear left-brain into the more intuitive right brain. What they make is entirely their own - the media may be art, poetry, prayer collage or something else it doesn't really matter. What does matter is how it mediates their relationship with God.

In these times of technology overload perhaps the kataphatic is the way God is opening to their maturity. As directors let's not see it as a prelude. Let's assume it is it's own thing. The higher value placed on one or the other is a false value because the Divine reality is exactly the same.

"The kataphatic path or via affirmativa emphasises the similarities between God and creation and creatures; BECAUSE God can be found in all things the affirmative way recommends the use of concepts, images and symbols as a way of contemplating God."

Harvey D. Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition*, New York: Pueblo. 1984, 31.

What kinds of things can we expect creative and/or cataphatic pathway directees to bring to direction?

What have you found they bring?

Words, music, feelings - God speaking to them through these (including other media such as film, popular music...), items collected from nature such as.. ? Experiences with elemental things like fire, water, wind, earth. Things they've made as - photos they've taken, drawings, sculpture/modelling, creative writing, collages and then there dreams and the visionary experiences that flow from these other things.

But we never know do we, what our directee will arrive with. We prepare ourselves for a special conversation, we hope they have prepared too. It's nice when they arrive with their journal - that's a good sign! It's another thing entirely when there is a full-on tryptych - three full size paintings based on a window in a Cologne Cathedral! Here it is! More about that soon. The opposite can also happen - when the creativity is blocked, dried up and the artist is mired in loss.

As directors we can be aware that we feel intimidated or overwhelmed by creative directees and what they bring. It may even prompt self-doubt, as we wonder if we are the right director for them. I think it's simply an area of growth and the differences between ourselves and our directees allow room for good questions, naive questions and genuine leaning on the Spirit of Jesus in the conversation.

I'd like to spend a few minutes on these elements we've seen directees bring to us to create a context for all them:

Visual, tangible or legible, edible elements or media have varying levels of significance for directees as we probably know - but once something is identified as a means of grace an interesting thing happens. It remains so. Even though it's significance or prominence will fade -it will lie dormant in the heart and deep memory of the directee and at any time God can resurrect it. The fading of it will hopefully come about because we have assisted the directee to work with it well. He or she will have pretty much sucked the marrow out of its bones and it has nothing more to offer at this time...but at some future time it is quite likely that this significant symbol will re-emerge with fresh meaning and immediacy. It's like the gift that keeps on giving. We can't predict when or how it will happen but it is good to be alert to. For the creative directee or the one on the cataphatic path the media they make or find are like a series of doors that may swing open or closed at God's

initiative. As the director we need to be alert to the significance of the media for the directee, to take it seriously and be present to it - so that we can recognise that door when it swings open next time. So we can welcome the gift back.

SLIDE 6 WHAT IS HAPPENING FOR THE DIRECTEE

What kinds of things are happening for the directee through this medium?

- they are uncovering a new aspect of God's presence or activity in their life
- perceiving a sense of mystery during an event that deepens with subsequent reflection
- they experienced an immediate awareness of God in a particular area or relationship as a result of this medium

SLIDE 7 WHAT ARE WE DOING?

What are we doing?

- we are helping them reflect and creating space for the **accumulation** of meaning and deepening of mystery
- we are supporting their seeking of an intimate relationship with Christ.
- we helping them in their work of integrating their experience and living it out in love and service - this is where they are heading

SLIDE 8 ACCUMULATION

Let's talk about "accumulation" for a moment. I love this sense of the gradual gathering, piling up, and layers of meaning. It's different I think to the idea of something unfolding. Think about cumulus clouds, or accumulated wealth. It's a gathering in and then the enjoying of it.

My personal experience of accumulation of meaning and deepening of mystery centred around a moment in a time of sung worship at a leader's conference in our Vineyard movement. I felt so sublimely happy and close to Jesus that I said to him, "I could die right now and that would be enough." I heard him say, "I bind you to myself"... I spend several years gathering and accumulating the meaning of this and exploring the deepening of the mystery with my director. It's only now as I was preparing this that I have gathered another glorious part - I understand my Captor did this not only so I could be bound to him but so a bound up and imprisoned part of me could be set free....the artist in me.

SLIDE 9 WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

So, what is it we are looking for in our directee who is clearly moving along the pathway of images, symbols, and felt experiences?

- We are looking for Christ-centredness not self-centredness. We are looking for this one to be growing in love for God and for others - always the true benchmarks of spiritual progress.
- Are they moving towards wholeness and peace (Brennan Manning).
- Are we noticing their prayer experience simplifying?
- What spontaneity and ongoing connection with God are they growing into?
- what changes in their image of God are taking place?

- areas of freedom are they moving into?

SLIDE 10

- how is what they are experiencing affecting their relationships with others?
- how is it felt in their body?
- what changes or deepening can they identify?
- where are they in Walter Brueggeman's 3 part movement of orientation, disorientation, new orientation?

Our training in dream work provides us with excellent questions and a familiar set of tools for approaching working with images and symbols. Naming the image, looking for the feeling that arises, allowing the symbols to "speak", looking at the relationships in the image and how they might reflect the relationship God desires with the directee, what tools or objects are in the image and how do they reflect the action or abilities/calling of the directee, what is the landscape like and how does it fit with the interior experience of the directee. Is their struggle showing up here? How is God revealing Godself? How is the directee seeing him or herself? And the marvellous - what's the invitation? Truly, our dreamwork training works really well here!

SLIDE 11 RUFFING QUOTE

Janet Ruffing defines spiritual growth and maturity as the "development and emergence of a unique and original appropriation of Christian mysteries".

When our directee is creating something they are often theologising. False images of God and themselves are uncovered, recognised and rejected. New healthy ones emerge in the intuitive work of the creative process. Spiritual direction helps with this enormously.

SLIDE 12 CAROLINE SECURELY ORIENTED

Here's how one creative directee worked with her mid-life transition and loss of earlier images of God. As a South African woman with a strong Christian heritage in her family whose father was an itinerant evangelist and bible teacher she had some difficulties when the invitation to move away from and grow into new ways of relating to God. She was moving out of her "settled orientation" - Much as she loved God devotional time was something that had to be done "like going to the gym". You do it because it's good for you not because you love it.

SLIDE 13 PAINFUL DISORIENTATION

As we met we noticed over time an emerging sense of herself as one who carries God in her.

We used the Greek Orthodox church language of Theotokos for this. She, like Mary, is a God-bearer. Not in the same way of course but nevertheless she is a woman in-dwelt by Jesus. Then a business trip with her husband took her to Cologne and in the cathedral there she had a profound experience with the Pentecost windows and seeing Mary, the God-bearer present in the upper room with the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit. As an artist she worked with this.

SLIDE 14 SURPRISING REORIENTATION

The result was this - three paintings that represent her disintegration and lack of clarity, the emerging resolution and the moment of illumination and clarity. Each of these paintings can be swapped around so the movement flows from where ever she finds herself.

You can see her theologising. You can see her healing. You can see her struggle. I love that I can see Walter Brueggemann here and she has no idea who he is. I love that she sees herself in the place of grace and honour. Robed in humanity and divinity. One into whom the Divine arrived and onto whom the Holy Spirit is alighting.

These were brave moves by this directee. Can you see how she has appropriated Christian mysteries in an original and unique way?

She is clearly an artist but here's something from someone who wouldn't claim to be:

Viv recently attended our retreat called "Living Room: A walk through the house of my life." Part of the creative work of this retreat is to actually make a house and then to prayer-collage it wall by wall, room by room, floors and some even do basements and attics!

Here's what happened for Viv - this is her theologising and making meaning:

SLIDE 15 THE HOUSE OF LOVE

God's house of love.

Vivienne

Holt

On the first night of the silent weekend retreat, we were encouraged to draw a door, but I discovered I was not ready to open it then. Nor was I keen to design my own *House and Garden* type home for Jesus to live in. I wanted *Jesus* to open the door and invite me into **his** home for me. I spent some time flicking through magazines and following God's leading to colours, words and images.

I woke at 4am the next morning, however, with a sense of excitement about the house project. All the pieces started knowing where to go and it was taking a clear shape. The question "*Am I living in the house of fear or house of love?*" came back to me and I knew I wanted to include the tension and temptation to live in the darkness and lies of the house of fear. There is no colour on the wall of fear and its counterfeit trinity of lights illumines only its consequences (*blasted internally, rarely seen, fear fog*). I was ready to open the door to the house of love.

There would be three rooms in it: Father God (Creator), Son Jesus (Person of Truth) and Holy Spirit (Sanctuary of Life and Freedom). Every room would have the word *LOVE* in it. I even felt led to place the names of my three children in a specific room to help me in praying for them.

I was delighted that the front door opened into a spacious mountain scene, but there was also that big chair that my Abba invites the little girl me to climb into and sit in his embrace. For the Jesus room, I was drawn to a picture of a white mirror and words that declare who He says I am, whether I believe it or not! And the Spirit room was vibrant, tranquil and empowering. I have long felt I have been in a winter season of life until challenged by God to not rely on external signs of spring's coming, but to choose internally to live in a season. The words *Bring Spring Inside* captured this well.

There were more words and images than I had room for, so I collaged the foundations of the house also. I thoroughly enjoyed getting lost in my right brain space. Then I felt another question taking shape within me: “*Why go out the front door of this house again when there was so much to explore within this house of love?*” I accepted that this was my place of belonging. I rested and thanked God for my renewed acknowledgment: “I’m home.”

It was actually in direction that the invitation to go through the door into the house of love and not go out of it again became clear. She hasn’t remembered that. Typical! But look! She has continued to reflect after the session and a really terrific question has formed - “Why go out the front door of this house again (back into the house/room of fear) when there is so much to explore within this house of love? As we looked at her house together we noticed that there was a one-way movement through that door and into everything else. Her theology is strongly Trinitarian, warm, loving, inviting, empowering.

Meaning has developed for her - she and her family have returned from the mission field and she is clearly in transition but here is an important awareness for her - “I’m home”. The House of Love is her home. The on-going work of exploring the rooms and integrating their God-images and meaning is going to be enormous fun for whoever her spiritual director is!

You can see how this house, when finished with, may be tucked away somewhere. And also how God might re-activate the gift of the House of Love for her again at a later time. You can see how it isn’t intellectualizing. She has appropriated the loving images - she is *owning* them. It is her operative theology not just a pretty idea. She really is HOME.

For someone like Viv who doesn’t come from a Christian tradition rich in rituals or symbols the right-brained creative activity gave her a chance to engage in meaning-making and theologising. She has her own symbol now.

The retreat was truly “living room” for her - she had room to formulate her own interpretations of her life, faith and God.

Any spiritual direction session where someone brings something along is a chance for them to orientate themselves and their experience around Jesus. We encourage the reflection that deepens the mystery, that enables them to discover more of what God is up to in them.

I mentioned earlier that vibrant, life-giving symbols will fade in potency. This can present it’s own problems. The sense of disturbance, loss - the reluctance to let it go. The question of why, when it was so meaningful, has it seemingly died? But this is part of it. It takes back to Brueggemann again. Or to Caroline’s painting. God is inviting them to the smeared, unclear part but won’t leave them there. Something new will emerge. It may be helpful for the directee in this place to know that the gift remains and hasn’t gone. The “door” may have closed for now - like the children who returned to England from Narnia -but Jesus, the blessed Key of David, who opens what no man can open and shuts what no man can shut may invite them back through it at some future time.

Our orientation is to pick up on the nuances. To see perhaps what they have missed and enquire about that. It’s one thing to come to direction from or during a retreat but another thing entirely to come from the workplace or home. These little ‘dots’ are sometimes overlooked by our directees but we notice them and together - the three of us, can stand back and see the whole picture.

Sources:

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