

*Ellen Gunter welcomes students and presents the class as well as the special Facebook page for the class (Spiritual Direction –Caroline Myss).*

CAROLINE MYSS: Hi everybody. Welcome. I would like to begin our class and our course with a prayer. I want you to know that we are gathering people from all over the world, so think about this as the beginning of joining with a wonderful, global spiritual community with which we begin our sojourn into spiritual direction. And with that in mind, sit quietly and let me take you deep into this beautiful prayer.

*(Caroline reads a prayer by Thomas Merton from the book Prayers for Healing edited by Maggie Oman)*

*Do you need me? I am there.*

*You cannot see me, yet I am the light you see by.*

*You cannot hear me, yet I speak through your voice.*

*You cannot feel me, yet I am the power at work with your hands and in your hands.*

*I am at work, though you do not understand my ways.*

*I am at work, though you do not recognize my works.*

*I am not strange visions. I am not mysteries.*

*Only in absolute stillness, beyond self, can you know me as I am, and then but as a feeling and a faith.*

*Yet I am there. Yet I am here. Yet I answer.*

*When you need me, I am there.*

*Even if you deny me, I am there.*

*Even when you feel most alone, I am there.*

*Even in your fears, I am there. Even in your pain, I am there.*

*I am there when you pray and when you do not pray.*

*Though your faith in me is unsure, my faith in you never wavers, because I know, because I love you.*

*Beloved, I am there.*

Welcome. Now, I want you to imagine something. I want you to imagine that you and I are meeting at a well, at a deep, deep well. And there at the well, just you and me, in a very quiet, quiet place, I give you a pebble – one pebble - and I say to you, “I want you to drop the pebble into the well and listen for a sound. One sound.” And you take a breath and you close your eyes and you drop the pebble into the well. And you listen for that one sound as the pebble drops in the water. And it’s a small pebble, so you have to listen carefully, deeply. But you hear it because the well is deep, the pebble is

small, but it will echo and you'll hear it. And you hear it very deeply, not only through your ears but you hear it all the way through you. That is the sound you're going to be listening for in yourself.

The pebbles that we drop into you. Pebbles in your inner well. That's the deep, deep sound of holy listening - the pebbles deep in yourself. And that kind of listening feels as though it's deep in your solar plexus in the world behind your eye - deep, deep in yourself. It's a profound kind of listening. It bypasses your ears and it goes deep within your interior space. It's a different type of listening, the pebbles that you drop into your well.

I want you to know that I've developed this course in spiritual direction because I believe we're craving the sacred and the capacity to listen, to do holy listening, to listen for the pebbles in our well, that we are missing that. In a sense we've become spiritual nomads, travelling way, way, way out of our religions and searching for something spiritual but we have not found the resting places. We have been looking from here to there, looking from here to there, but we haven't found anything. It's been a very, very long, long search.

So how I want you to picture this is though you have come in and sat down and the first thing I want to share with you is just small things I would say to anybody who came into my office and said, "I'm not sure what spiritual direction is. I'm not quite sure. What can you tell me about it? Because I'm not sure if I really understand it."

So I would take a few minutes and I would explain so that you understand exactly where I'm coming from - what it is and what it isn't. And in that process I would watch you relax into your chair. I would watch you unwind a little bit. I would watch you kind of get comfortable, as I made sure you understood that spiritual direction isn't about religion. It isn't about any particular religion at all. It's about holy listening. It's about you learning that there are many ways of getting into your interior so you can begin to listen to yourself in ways that bypass ordinary dialogue, perhaps for the first time in your whole life.

I think that I would say to you, "You know, we're used to talking about perhaps our problems and we're used to talking about our feelings and we're used to talking about our emotions." And maybe we're used to doing that publicly or perhaps with friends or maybe with support groups or maybe in therapy or maybe casually. Or maybe we're not used to doing that at all. But what is socially very ordinary is the voice of the complainer or the voice of the problem person or speaking in problems, or speaking in frustration or speaking about day-to-day life, or speaking the voice of confusion, or speaking in the voice of fear, or speaking in the voice of chaos. That's become a normal language. That's become a language we're very accustomed to. And we know how to respond to that language. We know how to speak

that language. So it's somewhat unimaginable that there are other languages that we can speak. And it may even be unimaginable that we have needs not just to speak but to be listened to very, very deeply.

Among those needs, is the need to listen to ourselves. Not just to have another person listen to us, but to actually listen to ourselves, to actually be still and listen to ourselves – what's brewing inside of us, what we're feeling, and beyond the feelings that are ordinarily associated with emotional rumblings or psychological rumblings - the feelings that go deeper than that, that are the ones that are experiential with the core of our being.

This is what spiritual direction is. It seeks to go deeper.

Let me give you an example of the many examples I could choose, but nothing speaks like an example does.

Many, many, many times – many times - in my career, I've had the privilege of speaking with people who share their life experiences – experiences from their life. One of the most common is an experience that goes like this: a person will share - and I'm thinking of one woman in particular - the crisis of "I didn't know what to do, everything was falling apart." In fact, I had this exact conversation earlier today. But this is not the woman I'm speaking of but a very similar conversation: "I didn't know what to do. Everything was falling apart and yet I knew I would be alright."

It's often the case that if you were in therapy, for example, the dialogue in therapy might direct you to talk about your fears. Well, let's talk about the anxiety that this brings up. Let's talk about the stress that you feel when these problems come up.

But I as your spiritual director go the other way. I would say, "How did you know you were going to be alright? What was that feeling like?" Nevermind all the stress – we'll get to that. Or maybe we won't. I want to talk to you about how you knew you'd be alright, because that's the important part.

That's the important part. What was that like? Did you feel something? How did you know? When did you know that? Talk to me about that. Talk to me about what made you so sure. Did you feel something? Did you hear something? What was that knowing like? That's the important voice. That's holy listening. That told you, "Be still. I'm with you."

And it eclipsed for a second all the chaos in your life. It was a sufficient dose of grace that was strong enough to say, "You'll get through this. This is temporary. But I am permanent. This will pass, but I will always be here."

Because after all those problems are gone, what you remember is "I knew I would get through it."

It's the knowing that you and I would talk about. That is spiritual direction. I would say to you, "Talk to me about that. You're problems, are they gone?" And you would say, "Yes, as a matter of fact they are." Right. But is that voice still here? "I think it is." There you go. That's what we would talk about. How profound is that? You see, that is what we're going after: holy listening. How exquisite is that?

Because there will always be some kind chaos that we're going through. There will always be the next problem. There will always be the next wave, the next storm in the sea, but that voice is the one you have to know is there: "I need that voice again, I need to go to that place. I need to listen again for the holy, the sacred. I need to go down deep to the voice I know is always there."

So spiritual direction, I would say to you as you sit here with me, is not therapy. It's holy listening and directing you to that place where you've already been and teaching you -instructing you - to go back there and then listening to you, asking you, to go into the many times you in fact have been there but didn't realize "You know, I was. I have. I did hear it. I didn't realize that was the sacred. I didn't recognize it."

Because so often, experiences of holy listening happen so fast – so fast - and they're so powerful that they come and go in such a quick second, such a quick moment. And they're so powerful that they reorganize. They're just sufficient to reorganize the whole of a disaster and then we just keep going.

But we don't take that precious time to sit back and say, "I knew I would get by. I was told back then that I would get through this. I really have to take a moment to sit back and reflect that I was told I'd get through this and what that means. That somehow - was it an angel that came through or a pebble dropped into my well? – a sacred pebble dropped deep into my well? - that told me, 'Look I'm watching over you. This is going to be fine. Just another storm. You're going to be ok. Don't let the storm scare you. Don't let it scare you.'"

It's these precious, sacred moments that in fact when we look back, you realize, "I've had pebbles dropped in my well all the time. All the time."

And it's then when we sit back and reflect on these, we can look back at the problems we've been through – some are terribly serious, very painful. Life is not simple. Life is life. But they are like boxes. And problems are like - they come in boxes. And how to get out of them? How to solve the problems? There is an instruction manual that's included in the box, believe it or not. It really is. It's included in there.

Problems come in boxes with instructions on how to get through them, how to get out of them. They're packaged. They're not like gelatin. They really do come in sort of a - there is a way out. There's a way in, there's a way out, there's a way through. It always is like that. That's how they're designed. So when we find ourselves in these situations if we keep that in mind, we can release and go into this deep place and say, "I need a pebble. I need a pebble."

So this is what holy listening is about: to remember, "I've always gotten these pebbles. I've always gotten them." So that was one of the reminders. I just want to say that in spiritual direction, I want to say to you, "I want to know how you knew you would get through." The rest is insignificant.

Now, my role with you beginning tonight and through these weeks ahead is to introduce you to holy listening and to help you in the path of discovery of what this is within yourself.

And while I obviously can't bring you in front of me into my actual office, I want to create that kind space between you and me to the best of the ability we have to do that. I have lit a candle. I lit a candle - here it is - before the class, and I started out with this sense of the sacred, because this for me is a sacred space between you and me. I treat this as the same type of sacred space I would if you were here with me and I could speak to you directly.

And if you would light a candle in that same way perhaps next week, that is exactly how we would have one that is symbolic of the spirit between us and, for me, the sacred spirit.

I would also recommend a journal for note taking because I will be asking you questions to reflect on as your spiritual director for the next 6 weeks. Because my role is to ask questions for reflection, it is to stir your inner waters, it is to provide you with tributaries inside of yourself that you have not yet discovered perhaps. It is to engage you in conversation with yourself that you have never considered before. To listen, to get you, inspire you, to wake up the listener in you so that you can be still and listen - and want to do that.

So that is part of what I'm about in my role in your life in the next 6 weeks, and to take you down deep, to introduce you to prayer, to introduce you to contemplation, to lead you in this, to move you forward in the deep rich path of the interior life.

Finally, my personal approach with spiritual direction: I myself have worked and am still working with my own spiritual director. I have for 15 years, so I am no stranger to this. I have been with my own spiritual director every week for 2 hours for the past 15 years. I find in my own practice - so I will be

sharing from my own practice with you, which is a deeply personal thing to do.

But I have made - my own journey has taken me from entering spiritual practice in a very mental way - very, very mental way - coming in, chatting about all sorts of things in my life to eventually - eventually - realizing I needed a prayerful practice. So that didn't start out that way. And I'm sharing this in confidence because you are in my office with me. And so I will confide in you that I did not start out with a deep prayerful life.

Instead, I started out in the way I think most people would start out, which is in a very mental way, a very intellectual way, a very chatterbox way. Because that's the way we are. We are people of the mind, we are people of the intellect and we love our intellects. And for someone like me who relies on that as my main skill as a teacher, that was the world I dwelled in. Eventually, that became my greatest obstacle - my greatest obstacle - when it came to the road into myself, into my deeper self, and the road into learning holy listening and the sacred interior.

And that brought me to the second phase, which is the moment that I realized that I did not pray. I could talk about prayer. I could lecture on it like a pro. And I certainly could name all theologians - many of them, rather - who wrote about prayer and sacred experiences. But I stood in my kitchen one day and I said to myself, "You don't pray. I mean, I wrote prayers - petition prayers - but not real prayer. Not the sort in which you close your eyes and lose yourself in a deep, profound inner spiritual journey.

And then I thought, "Oh well, I'll have to do something about that" and then I went off about my day. But I knew - I knew - that I had done something very profound. Something had clicked, something had shifted in myself because I realized that - that I had crossed a sacred rubicon, that that realization was a pebble in my well, that I had dropped something in my well.

And as the days went on after that, into weeks and months, I started to read spiritual literature and I was actually writing *Invisible Acts of Power*. And it was shortly after that I had a grand mal seizure in my office. And coming out of it, I knew that something had happened to my "wiring." And it was shortly after that that I had my encounter with Saint Teresa of Avila. After that, my life took a different spiritual direction and the mystical part of my life began.

You know, at this point you might think "I'm outta here because the last thing I want is an encounter with a dead Catholic saint." No, this isn't going to happen. What I am going to say, however, is that I share this with you as a way of saying the profound sense of the inner is very real - it's real - and the craving to know the sacred within you is absolutely real.

And I deeply - what I know about all of us is that we have a soul and that the soul within us is a seeking, searching, sacred force. However it is you define sacred, from whatever tradition you come from - it is irrelevant to me.

As I look to you and you are sitting - in my mind and in my heart - you are sitting right across from me and I am looking into your eyes in my imagination: The soul in you is drawn to truth. When it hears truth, it stops to listen. When it witnesses truth, the soul in you brings you to your knees. When it feels truth, you are brought to tears.

When we've absorbed something that is not truth, we fall into pain and despair because that which is not truth will hurt you, and you know it. And the anguish you may feel that we are going to start talking about, that I, that you need to speak - you need to speak your anguish, you need to speak what is not true, not just your truth - what is not true - what you know is not true, you need to speak it. You need to let it out of you. You need to let out all that is not truth.

You need to let out what you know is not truth and then you need to speak, what is truth for you? What is it? What is truth? You need to explore what you know you can see. You need to explore that. You need to have someone listen to you.

I'm going to look you in the eyes and say, "How much can you see? How much can you feel? How much can you possibly intuit? How much? How big is your heart? How vast is your soul?"

That's what I'm here to explore with you. How vast are you? What a wondrous question! Has anyone ever asked you that? How vast are you? What a wondrous question! Can you even begin to answer that? No! But it's a question you take in and you go to your well and you drop that pebble and you think, "I want an answer to that." That is a prayer. "God, how vast am I? How vast am I?" That is your prayer.

So now imagine, you've walked into my office now. And you're sitting with me and we drop that pebble. And you're listening and imagine you hear this: "Fear not but I am the Lord, thy God, and I am calling you. Fear not, but I am the Lord, thy God, and I am calling you."

This is how the ancients were called in the Old Testament. Noah and Moses, Abraham, Elijah. All of them were called - "Fear not, for I am calling you. Come close to me. Have no fear, for I am calling you." What an extraordinary line! "Fear not but I am calling you."

Now, I am someone who believes that the restless soul who is seeking is the restless soul who is being called. "Fear not, for you have been called. Fear not." And their response was, "Lord, I am listening. I am listening. Your

servant is listening.” So your response is, “Lord, I am listening. Your servant is listening.”

That becomes a prayer for you – “Lord, I am listening. Lord, I am listening.” That becomes a prayer for you - “I am listening. I am listening” - like a mantra. This is your prayer: “I am listening. I am listening. I am listening. I am listening.” It becomes a prayer for you. A mantra. “I am listening.”

And you would sit in silence. “I am listening.” Not with your ears. And if you find your attention going to your ears, then I want to imagine you dropping a pebble in your well and it’s going deep, deep, deep, deep, deep here all the way into your solar plexus. And the pebble falls, falls, falls, falls and it goes deep into your solar plexus, all the way down here so that your intention goes past your heart and deep, deep, deep into your inner space. “I am listening. You called, and I am listening. You called, and I am listening.”

So imagine, you and I are sitting in the office and maybe you’re looking around and I would say to you, “So what brought you here? What brought you here?”

I’m going to answer that question probably for a lot of people. I’m going to offer some answers. And I would expect you now to take out your journal.

“What brought me to spiritual direction? What brought me here?” Maybe some of you would answer, “A need for a spiritual, sacred connection. I need a sacred connection.” And I would listen to you describe that and I would say, “A need for a sacred connection. Okay . That’s good, you need it. Tell me how you know you need that. How do you know? What part of you told you you need that? How did you know?” And I would ask you to describe that. So if that is your answer, I would ask you “Tell me how you know that. What part of you spoke to you?”

I want to listen to you describe that. I want to listen to that. I want to listen to every part of you describe that. Because it wouldn’t be a mental knowing. It would be more than that. What part of you spoke to you and said, “You’re craving a spiritual connection”? Because the mind doesn’t crave that. Some deeper part of you was restless. Describe that in your journal. Describe that.

Maybe some of you would say, “I have a need to stop searching for something outside of myself. I’m just tired of the search. I’m just tired of the search.”

I would say, “Well, that’s a really good answer. Ok, that’s a good answer. Well, describe the exhaustion. Describe that. Tell me how that feels. I want to listen to that. I want to listen to what your exhaustion sounds like. When did you start getting exhausted?” Because that’s not a mental thing. I want to listen to you describe how you started to get exhausted with that

particular search for something outside of yourself. Describe that exhaustion? What's it look like? Because it's different from the exhaustion of, "I am so tired today. I worked so hard." That's not that kind of exhaustion. This is a different type, this fatigue of trying to find something other than where I am now. What began to tell you, "Stop this search"? What told you to stop it? What voice said, "Stop it. Stop it. I'm not out there. I'm in here." What did you hear? Describe that voice.

Because I'm listening. And I want you to listen and I want you to tell me what that sounded like. Imagine you were talking to me and write that down. Imagine I was right there and write it down, as if you had to answer me.

Maybe some people would say, "I came into your office because I have a need to listen to my inner self without fear of what I might say. I've been afraid of what I might say - not to others but I'm afraid of what I might say and what I might hear myself say." I'd think, "That's a really good answer."

What do you think you might say that you're afraid of? You might say, "Well, I'm afraid of what I might believe and not believe. I'm afraid of maybe I don't believe anything." That's alright. Yeah, ok. "And maybe I'm afraid that if I admit I don't believe anything, then I might discover I do believe something." That's pretty good.

Now, what's wrestling beyond that? "And maybe I'm afraid that underneath it I really do want to believe something. I don't even know what I believe. But obviously, I want to believe something or I wouldn't be in this much pain." Right. So why don't you just talk about you think what is true, what isn't true? Does it matter?

What is true is that you want to believe in something greater than yourself. Would you just want to start there, in neutral space? "I want to believe in something greater than myself." Call it goodness. Just start in neutral space. That's it, that's all. Do you want to talk about that? "I'm afraid to believe in too much." Maybe you're afraid to believe in too little.

Just talk about anything. What are you afraid to say? Say it. I'm listening. Listen to yourself. Let yourself say what you are afraid to say. Just let yourself listen to everything you're afraid to say. Speak it out and let your world - just let yourself go.

Someone might say to me, "I came here because I have a need to find the courage to be free of my own fears. I'm tired of being fear-driven. I just need to find courage. I need courage." That's a good reason. Someone may say I'm not sure you're the right person to turn to. Well, that's true, too. You don't know. But I'll listen to you. I'll listen to you talk about your fears and after that let's talk about courage. What does courage feel like to you?

One woman said when she told me she knew she'd get through – this was just the other day – she told me she knew she'd get through all this madness in her life.

I said, "How did you know that?"  
She said, "I just knew it. I knew I'd get the courage."

I said, "Really? I'm not interested in - We'll deal with you're problems later." I didn't really quite say "I'm not interested" but I said, "How did you know?"

Because she used the word courage.

I said, "How did you know you'd get the courage? Where do you get courage, right?"

And she said, "Because I got it before. I got it before."

I said, "Where? Where did you get it? How wonderful!"

And she said, "I don't know. I don't know."

And I said, "Well, let's just think of that. Where did it come from?"

And she said, "Well, I don't know. I don't know."

I said, "Where did you think it came from?"

And I said, "What other experiences in your life have you felt courage just drop into you? Did it drop into you or did it come through you? Or did you feel it bubbling up? Where did it come from?"

She said, "Well I felt like it just bust open in me when I needed it."

I said, "Ah. Well, did it feel like just when you need it, just in time?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

I said, "Would you call it like an explosion of grace just in time?"

And she said, "I never speak about grace."

And I said, "Well, ok. Would you think it was like a gift?"

And she was quiet for a moment and she said, "Who gave me the gift?"

And I said, "Well, you could just say it was luck."

She said, "I don't like that word."

And I said, "I'll put them all out: grace, gift or luck? Which one can you live with?"

And she laughed and she said, "Well, I'll start out with gift and work my way to grace."

But as she thought about courage, she said every single time it came out of nowhere just when she needed it most, which as she thought about it, gave her such a sense that no matter what problems she ever would face, as she thought about it, she knew she would get this delivery of a gift of grace. So it completely re-shifted her whole sense of, "I can deal with anything."

So that was how we begin with our discussion of what brought you here.

Then we shift to the next one, which is: what do you think your essential spiritual needs are? What do you think? What do you think your basic spiritual needs are?

Now again, you might say that you have no idea because you've never thought about it. That's why you're in my office. You have absolutely no idea that you haven't thought about that at all. And that's fair. A lot of people haven't. They don't even think of their spiritual life having spiritual needs. That's fair.

You might say that's what you've come here to figure out. Ok, then both of us would agree we're going to pursue listening and figuring out what your spiritual needs are and discussing those.

You may say, "You know, I wouldn't mind discussing prayer because I don't know much about it, I haven't prayed a lot. Maybe I'll find it comfortable, maybe I won't."

I'll say, "Fine, we'll discuss prayer. We'll examine what that is." We'll talk about that sometimes prayer is very comfortable. Sometimes it feels like you're talking to air. Sometimes you feel very foolish. Sometimes you feel like, "I don't get this. I pray and I don't see anything move. Objects don't move. I don't see any answer. And sometimes it feels like the answer comes immediately. Sometimes it feels like it's the most powerful force ever. Sometimes I pray because I don't know what else to do. I don't understand prayer."

Fine. And you and I will discuss prayer and its mysteries because they are many. They are many. Good, we'll put that on our agenda. Prayer.

You might ask, "Well what are essential spiritual needs? Why don't you just explain that to me and I'll see if any of them check out?" I would say, "Fine, so let me do that."

The spirit in you by nature, by its very nature, your spiritual nature no matter who you are, no matter what tradition you come from, no matter what background, no matter anything, just because you're a human being - so let's just strip away all backgrounds, everything - the human being, human nature, the human spirit, it requires time to contemplate its actions, its choices. It requires each day some contemplative time, time to contemplate. Isn't that a beautiful word?

A contemplative time during the day to contemplate, to withdraw, to think, "How am I engaging today? What kind of choices did I make and why did I make them? What's driving me?" That's one level of contemplation.

Another is to simply reflect on the beauty of your life, on quality of your life, on gratefulness for your life. I am mindful.

If you said, "Give me an example," which I wish you would right now, because I'm going to give you an example:

One of the most wonderful passages - I have it right here in the back of my office - is by Thomas Merton, which I've shared so many times and I'm going to share it now because he wrote it and he was a magnificent spiritual director.

He wrote - and it's from his journal - "It was a hot day in June." And he was a prolific writer and he was describing the area around his little hermitage in Gethsemane, Kentucky, and he said "It was a very hot day" and he was just describing nature, that's all. There was a bull that was lying under a tree and he was describing how the hot wind was blowing across the fields and causing the flowers to lean over. And he said he had been walking up the hill that day and it was hard for him because he was getting older and he could feel his heart pounding in his chest and he said, "I'm getting older." And he made note of that. And he described how the sun was hitting the sides of the mountain. It was a kind of purplish red hue because of the time of day.

But he ends it with - ah, this is so beautiful - "This day will never come again." That struck me. That stuck me that day as one of the most profound things I had ever read in my life. "This day will never come again."

It is a simple sentence, really - but no, it is not. That was one of the most profound things I have ever read in my life.

That every day in our lives will never come again. I took that into contemplation and it changed my life. I contemplated on it. I do every day now and think that every day in my life will never, ever come again and I reflect upon that. And I take that in and I think, "I will never see that sunrise again and I will never see that sunset again."

And there have been very few times when I have failed to look at a dinner with friends or an evening with my family where I have not thought, "This evening will never come again. This holiday will never come again. This evening with my business partner will never come again. This time will never come again." I always use that as my sacred spiritual mantra because it won't come again.

And so with that in mind, I up the ante on how precious every choice I make is. I weigh my words carefully, I hold my thoughts together.

And so in terms of spiritual direction, how I direct own my spirit into action, I give it that prayer: This day won't come again.

Contemplation is a spiritual need because it takes you into a place where you up your awareness of what is of value. You take thoughts and truths and digest them. And you shift the coordinates of your life. You shift them. You decide to redirect yourself. The spirit in you takes directions from you. And you take directions from it. There is a dialogue. You learn. You say, "This day won't come again." That is wisdom I must live by, and I will redirect my life according to that wisdom. That is spiritual direction.

You need, we need, the spirit in us needs to examine on a regular basis our moral and ethical conscience. We need that. What is right for us? What is wrong for us? What is good for us? What is not? We cannot live with guilt. We do, but one of the reasons we suffer is because we have no outlet for our own dark choices for guilt. We can seek therapy, but therapy is not the same outlet; it does not heal guilt of the soul. It does not.

There is such a need as the need to confess. We need to say, "I have done something wrong. I've done something wrong and I need to speak openly about this." Sometimes spiritual directors can help a person with that. Sometimes you can come and say, "I need to say this. I need to speak this out. I have made a horrible choice, I need to empty my soul" without blaming someone else for your choice, without excusing yourself – just owning your own actions. So I would say to you, "I'll listen. Just tell me what you did."

And what cleans the soul is when you can say, "I'm not going to blame anyone. I did this clearly of my own free will." Free will and choice – put it together. Say, "I did this of my own free will. I chose to do this and, in fact, I probably wanted to. And the outcome was pretty bad but I did it and I've got to clean this up."

That is what the soul needs, that is an essential part of keeping us clean inside, is the need to make right choices, becoming conscious of why we make the choices we do and not relying on wounds to excuse choices. There comes the time when we have to release wounds and say, "I'm on to choices of the clear conscience. I'm no longer using excuses. I need to get on with a clear-minded heart. I need to get on with it. I need to clear up here, clear up old stuff, clear up the debris. I need to get on with it." These are essential spiritual needs.

Now I'm going to ask you, I'm going to look right at you and say, "I have a question for you. What's your experience of the holy? What's your experience of the sacred? What have you personally experienced? Have you had an experience of inner knowing? Have you had an experience inner guidance? Have you had an experience of spiritual phenomenon? Have you ever had a spontaneous experience of wonderment?"

I want to listen to you talk to me about that. I want you to write in your journal as though I was there listening to you. I want you to just tell me, what have you experienced? Have you felt you had a dream in which something spoke to you? Have you had that wonderful experience of feeling grace fill you up and feel chills moving through you and what did that mean to you? What did that tell you about yourself? What did that make you feel about yourself?

I want to listen to that. I want you to describe it in detail. What did you that make you think about yourself? Was there just one or were they several or how did it change your life? And did your life go back to ordinary after that? Did it just evaporate? Was it one or several or did it just fade into the distance? Did you have an experience of the sacred that happened again? Is it ordinary for you? Extraordinary?

Discuss it. I want to know what your experience of the holy is. What does holy mean to you? Perhaps it means nothing. Perhaps you would say, "I have no experience at all. Not at all."

I have a book that I was reading in preparation for this class. I don't know how many books I've read, I dusted it off a shelf so big. I'll let you in on a secret because it's just you and me, but I was reading one of my old books that I just absolutely love. And in fact I'm going to actually share from it later, it's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. It's a book that I love, and one I would recommend actually. But it's an old book – I mean, it goes back to the late 1800s.

And in it, William James was studying religious experiences and of course back then he was very focused on Christian experiences of the divine at a time when spiritual experiences were in fact being studied. And he came across a person - he was very interested in people who were sick and then who got healed and this sort of thing - and very interested in the soul and the nature of the soul and how it worked and didn't have anything do with healing - what he noted was that people who were unhappy, people who had no faith at all, people who were doubters or who were absolutely convinced, who were pessimists, who were negative, who just shied away from any idea that there was anything at all, these people were most prone to being filled with despair and filled with negativity, filled with what he called bad humors, depression. And this was at a time when he really did not have the agenda to do something supportive of Christianity. He really was just searching for phenomenon.

So here I would say that he discovered way back then in his own work that when one is detached from, when one is completely saturated in the sense of, out of touch with conscience, out of touch with what is right or wrong, out of touch with a sense that personal choices about goodness or what is right in the world matter, he noted that will lead to despair and depression,

absolutely. I would have to concur and I am 150 years down the road. So, I would have to say that there's something sacred about getting to that place in yourself where you know that things matter in terms of "I need to get straight with my own inner self."

Now, in terms of your experience of the holy, let me ask you if, in terms of being spontaneous with the holy and the sacred, dreams matter, guidance matters – all of that is a form of spontaneity – and I would ask you if you were here and in front of me, "Does it scare you, would you be frightened to have an immediate, intimate experience of the holy?" You might mentally say, "Absolutely not." But here's I would say to you, "Don't answer me too quickly." I want you to take that into reflection, into contemplation and imagine yourself alone, all by yourself, and then ask yourself, "Really, am I comfortable having a deep, mystical experience?"

Ok, the rational part of you.

Ok, now. We have to go to Q&A pretty quickly. So I'm going to go to a question, which is, "How do you pray?" How do you pray? Because I think you might ask me that: "How do I pray?" And this will lead to the exercises.

Well, I would answer this: there's repetition prayer and there's petition prayer, which is "Can I have this?" And there are familiar prayers – you know, the prayers that most people know from their traditions.

But I am going to turn to something that I have right up my sleeve, thank goodness, right in my office, right here. And this is from John of the Cross, who says, "Seek in reading and you will find in meditation. Knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation." So I'm going to say that again: "Seek in reading and you will find meditation." So John of the Cross is saying when you read something, you can it into meditation. But if you knock in prayer, it'll open in contemplation. And that for John of the Cross was what he called divine reading. It's translated into when you read something of the divine, it's like swallowing grace and you take that and you read something holy. And you contemplate on it, you spend a moment with it and you read it, so I'm going to do that right now and then we will go to questions. I'll do this very, very fast. I have so much to choose from, but I'll do this.

*(Caroline reads from Genesis 32:24-29)*

*Jacob remained alone and behold, a man wrestled with him until morning. And when he saw that he could not overcome him, he touched the sinew of his thigh and forthwith it shrank. And he said to him: Let me go, for it is break of day. He answered: I will not let thee go except thou bless me. And he said: What is thy name? And he answered: Jacob. But he said: Thy name shall not be called Jacob, but Israel: for if thou hast been strong against God, how much*

*more shalt thou prevail against men? Then Jacob asked him: By what name art thou called? And he answered: Why dost thou ask me my name? And he blessed him in the same place.*

Genesis.

I love this passage, and this by the way is from Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*. Merton writes:

*(Caroline reads from The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation by Thomas Merton)*

*The battle is with man and yet it is with God, for it is the battle of our exterior self with the interior self. The ache in which is the likeness of God in our soul, which appears at first to be utterly opposed to the only self we know. It is the battle of our own strength, lodged in the exterior self and the strength of God, which is the life and actuality of our interior self.*

This is so brilliant. It's so brilliant I can hardly stay in my body!

*(Caroline continues to read from the same passage)*

*And in the battle, which takes place in the darkness of the night, the angel, the inner self, wounds a nerve in our thigh so that afterwards we limp. Our natural powers are restricted and crippled. We are humbled and made ignorant. We see that we have become foolish and that even in good works we limp in our feeble. But also, that we drawn to evil. We have no longer have the power run swiftly in pursuit of it, yet we have the power over our antagonist to the extent that we cannot overcome him, yet we do not let him go until he blesses us.*

In other words, let me translate this. When we realize that what looked the hardship was a blessing. The hardship was a blessing. The weak part of us, in us, the part we have to battle, that looks to draw us down, was in fact the part when we finally defeat us that in fact makes us the strongest. And it is a God part in us. This is spiritual direction where you actually get, "I must not be defeated, even by myself. Even in my darkness."

Ok, now, the practice. Let me give you the practice. And then I will turn to questions. And I will put this on Facebook but I am going to go through it with you now.

On holy listening. "I am listening." I want you to practice "Everything is a gift" and then listen. Imagine you're dropping a pebble in the well.

"Everything is a gift." And then you listen.  
"My life is abundant." And then you listen.

“Grant me the grace to see my life through love.” And then you listen.  
“I am here, Lord.” And then you listen.

These are your prayers. I will write them up and they’ll be on your Facebook. And I will make sure the questions I’ve asked are on the Facebook and I would like you to, if you would, write your answers this week in your journal because it’s important you’re journaling and talking to me. In the meantime, the Reflections Facebook where you can dialogue with each other but it’s very important that you do your holy listening and keep journals, even if you are making notes. But you must listen and express yourself.

Next week, “Everything Has Meaning and Purpose” is our next session. It’s a very important one for all of us to be together on that. So now I’ll turn to questions. Thank you.

**STUDENT QUESTION:** Hi! This is Laura from Montreal. Question: Is there a difference between intuition and holy listening? How would you recommend us to start developing holy listening now, by praying?

**CAROLINE:** I would define intuition as kind of a gut response, whereas holy listening is more the art of mixing with prayer. I mean, it’s more the specific task of going deep within through prayer and specifically looking for the sacred within. And that is not what you necessarily associate with intuition, which is more of a gut living instinct based on survival. It’s not just a wordsmith difference here. I use my intuitive hit for life survival.

But holy listening I would turn more in terms of “what is troubling me,” a belief crisis. That is far more the search for God. How would I recommend us to start developing holy listening now? The exercises I’ve just given you will be the beginning. All the questions that I’m going to put up on the Facebook - asking yourself those questions and pausing, listening and then writing them down and certainly spending time in contemplation and prayer, which those exercises will absolutely require. Yes, all of that. And I’m going to ask a couple of other things, which will include spending time walking. These exercises are very typical of what’s called Ignatian spirituality – to take time to walk alone or sit alone and literally with the intention of breathing out stress, daily chaotic stress so you can be silent within. Thank you, Laura.

**STUDENT QUESTION:** If we can hear God deep within, if our life has been one that only leads to living deep within, then what do we do when life places us on a new vista and then the divine goes quiet? He whispers to me but leaves me with little direction at this time...

**CAROLINE:** You know, that’s a wonderful question. That’s a very rich, wonderful question. Then what you do is accept the divine as being silent.

That's what you do. You know, the divine - just because there's nothing doesn't mean there's nothing. It means that this is a time for you to be still. Stillness is also guidance. You say, "He leaves you with little direction." That is not without direction. Stillness is its own direction. It's time to be still. Stillness is itself a direction. It's "well I am where I am supposed to be, so I am still. I am fine. That is its own instruction. Okay.

STUDENT QUESTION: Can we serve as our own spiritual director, by listening deep within for guidance? How do we know if what we hear is correct and not what we want to hear or what we fear? Ellen – Florida

CAROLINE: I think, yes, we can do that. But here's where I think we can and maybe it's a little bit challenging to do that because even the most advanced individuals had a spiritual director. Even Thomas Merton had a spiritual director. Even Teresa of Avila had a spiritual director. And I'll tell you why.

It's because there is a need in us for holy listening, to have ourselves articulate what we are experiencing. To have it articulated, to have it spoken or written so that we express it, so we put words to it. That's why whether you write or speak it, it needs to be articulated.

And in sharing it, whether you share, you know, on Facebook, online, or in your journal, what it does is it makes you reflect on it, it makes you think about it, it makes you really – it's like an act of accountability. And it's very difficult to direct oneself because sometimes you need a reflector that says, "Are you sure about that? Are you sure that's how you're feeling? Because I sense conflict."

And that's why the need for the other is there. And sometimes you can see a conflict in your own writings, and sometimes you can't. And that's where, you know, I usually encourage people to eventually partner with somebody or to find a spiritual director or to find a group of soul companions, if you will, and we'll get to that later.

How do we know if something you hear is correct and not what we need to hear or fear? That's exactly where the art of listening goes deeper and deeper and deeper. You know what you hear is correct because it's often what you don't want to hear. Two, the instructions always lead you to do what you should do and not what you want to do. The instructions from the soul are always ones of healing and transformation. They are never instructions that do harm to others. Or while others may end up in pain, you don't cause suffering deliberately. So soul instructions are always in the long run are ones that benefit people. Okay.

STUDENT QUESTION: Does a spiritual life exist without discipline?  
Catalina. San Francisco. CA.

CAROLINE: No. Not a real one. That's not the right word. Not an authentic one that actually develops into something worthy. Why is that? Because the spiritual path is about the pursuit of truth. That's what it's about. When you say a spiritual life, I'm not sure how you mean that. I know how I mean that. And the spiritual path is and has always been, no matter what tradition, is the pursuit of truth – which means whether it's truth in your personal life or whether it is truth of a cosmic nature.

The spiritual path, like with Buddha, is the breaking down one illusion one after another, after another, after another Like going from, "Oh, the world is round, it's not flat." Okay. Or "We are not the only galaxy in the universe." Okay. That's like discovering one greater truth after another, after another. And if the world's not flat, well then it's round. Well, what does that mean? It means that every flat investment I've ever made is no longer valid. Well, now that we're living in the quantum world, what does that mean? It means that everything you've ever learned about matter being first and energy second is now wrong. It's now erroneous. It's all gone.

We have to relearn everything. It takes a lot of discipline to do that. Why? Because the inner self wants things to stay as they are. We like our illusions. We like them. We love them! And we don't want things to change and so it takes a lot of discipline to say, "I need to live my truth." Which means, "If I learn that forgiveness is the higher principle and that illness is attached to toxic thoughts and toxic feelings, I have got to clean up and become forgiving. I've got to stop saying, 'I can forgive that person but not this one.' I've got to live my truth. If I believe that there is reincarnation, I can't say 'Well, look at those innocent children,' because they aren't children. They are little humans with old souls. So I can't say innocent anymore. I've got to become congruent in my theology, so it takes a lot of discipline.

STUDENT QUESTION: How do you know when you're done with spiritual direction?

CAROLINE: Well, I've been at it for 15 years and I'm not done. And the reason I'm not done is because life is a challenge and I am always, always working something through. I'm always confronting myself about something. I'm always learning more. I'm always wondering more. I'm always taking something spiritual and I'm reading something more and I'm never done. And it's not about problems – eventually, I come to the point where I can't stop wanting more. So, I'm never done. And there it is.

STUDENT QUESTION: You spoke of confession and the need to empty your soul of something. I have no one to confess to, but I feel the need to confess.

Who should I confess to? I am not affiliated with a church or spiritual organization.

CAROLINE: I've been asked that question so many times, and I think one of the greatest sufferings we have in our society is because we do not have people to confess to. I have to say I really believe that. I think one of the reasons we have so many tortured souls is because they are really actually tortured souls. To that I would say, I would not necessarily want to put a spiritual director in the position of being a confessor because they're not. They're not meant for that.

I'm not sure what your situation is or your circumstances. I don't know that because you're not affiliated with a church does not mean that you cannot ask for confession from a priest – Episcopal or Catholic. You certainly can approach an Episcopal priest - they are more open-minded than a Catholic perhaps – and say, “I need you to hear my confession.” And that sacrament is available to you. And truly, I do recommend going to an Episcopal church, calling them up and saying, “Is there a confession of sacrament available?” And actually utilizing it. Because if that's what you need, that's what you should have.

STUDENT QUESTION: Will you give us some guidelines on how long or how often we should contemplate?

CAROLINE: You should do contemplation, absolutely. Let me suggest that – I'm going to be realistic about it and say that I would recommend you start with 10 to 15 minutes a day. That's not a long time, but it is a long time for beginners. And I want to be realistic about it. 10 to 15 minutes. And I would say, go into contemplation with something that can keep you company, something that you can read, something like a prayer, like “O God, grant me, I pray thee, light on my right hand and light on my left hand. Light above me and light beneath me.” Hold that prayer and go in and imagine light above you, light beneath you. And just imagine and feel and contemplate. What does that feel like? What does light feel like? And as you do that, think: Was my day light-filled? Or did I feel darkness? What was the day like? And pull that into you. Literally pull that into you. Just walk through your day again and how it felt and feel whether or not you feel whole or empty or how that felt for you.

STUDENT QUESTION: Does spiritual guidance always feel good? Nancy – Denver.

CAROLINE: No, it doesn't. It doesn't always feel good. It doesn't always feel good at all. It sometimes feels like the most painful thing in the world, because spiritual guidance is all about truth. And sometimes it feels

spectacular. And sometimes it's exactly what we need to know to heal. So, spiritual guidance is what we need - maybe not what we want - but it's certainly what we need.

I have a closing prayer. And this is a beautiful prayer from Merton.

*(Caroline reads Thomas Merton's prayer from the book I Have Seen What I was Looking for: Selected Spiritual Writings)*

*The reality that is present to us and in us  
call it being ...silence.  
And the simple fact that by being attentive,  
by learning to listen  
we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness  
that it cannot be explained:  
the happiness of being at one with everything  
in that hidden ground of love  
for which there can be no explanations...  
May we all grow in grace and peace,  
and not neglect the silence that is printed  
in the center of our being,  
It will not fail us.*

Thank you everyone, I'll see you next week. Bye.