

The Long and Winding Road

The Spiritual Travels of One Spiritual Formation Certificate Pilgrim

By Jerie Artz

In the moments of silence the woman's gentle voice asked us to write out a time line of the major moments of crises in our lives. It was not hard to reach back in my heart and relive the fears of my childhood, early marriage struggles, financial challenges, the loss of a baby, cross-cultural ministry in France, ministry hurts, deaths in the family, and last but not least, the overwhelming sense of helplessness as our post teen sons made life choices that threw me into an emotional tail spin.

It was the fall of 1999 and I was attending the Immersion Course at Columbia Seminary, led by Julie Johnson. I had the privilege to begin the Spirituality Program in 1998 through the satellite campus that offered courses, at that time, at Skyline Camp outside of Detroit, Michigan. I was determined to finish the certificate program, because God had come to me in a new and deep way through the ministry of a Spiritual Director, mentor and friend, Marion Buteyn.

My husband was serving as an Interim Associate Pastor in Bakersfield, California when the sense of helplessness about our sons overwhelmed me. I turned to Marion, the senior pastor's wife who had a ministry of Spiritual Direction in our church. There was something about her life that called out to me. I sensed it had something to do with that "Spiritual Direction" ministry with which

she was involved, but I had no idea the spiritual depths that I was about to discover.

Marion invited me to attend a seven week program at St. Philips Catholic Church entitled "Group Spiritual Direction." I went to the first session thinking that if it wasn't something I really had time for in my "busy" schedule I would not continue. But that Saturday morning, with tears welling up inside me, it was as if, like Alice in Wonderland, I entered into a rabbit hole and began a spiritual freefall into an intimacy with God that has continued to this present day.

The only way I can possibly describe the following three years, is to say that it was just like falling in love. It was saturation in the love and grace of God's presence in everything around me as I experienced living in the present, being present to the present and to the Presence. I was learning to be a "human being" and not a "human doing." The crises that led me to this path were not resolved immediately, but something happened inside of me, a letting go that brought inner peace as I learned to live Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God."

My husband took a church in Michigan and I shared with the Pastoral Nominating Committee my desire to continue this path of Spiritual Direction. A woman in the church had begun the certificate program and invited me to join her. The Immersion Course had already been given at the satellite campus, but Columbia Theological Seminary graciously let me begin the program anyway and I loved the New Testament Spirituality class taught by Brad Kent.

That brings me back to where I began, in the Immersion Course with Julie Johnson's gentle voice walking me through time line of my life. After writing out the crises in our lives, she asked us to trace the moments when God was most near. Click! There He was, right in the middle of each crisis with me. The times I felt Him most near, were the times that were the hardest to live.

It has been ten years since I began the program back in Michigan. That special grace of three years of intimacy with God is splashed across the pages of my journals. That initial intensity couldn't last forever, but my spiritual journey continues to be enriched by whatever God chooses to send my way. The course in "Group Spiritual Direction, Companions in Community" with Judy Durf and Lisa Meyers nourished my soul and gave me the best foundation for leading women's retreats. The notes and handouts from the "Healing and Wholeness" course, facilitated by Bell Clemens and Tim McCutchen, have been most useful in the workplace, at church and in my own life.

One thing I really appreciate about the certificate program is the option to take classes at various locations. The last course I attended was at Pittsburg Theological Seminary, "Mystic Spirituality" with Graham Standish in 2004. It has been a long and winding road to finish the certificate program, but the timing of each course made complete sense for the stage in my life at that moment. "Mystic Spirituality" gave me a framework or grid to understand the diverse expressions of Trinitarian spirituality after several years of walking this path.

Coming full circle, I have the joy to take my last required course, in April 2008, with Julie Johnson on “Retreat Leadership.” This is where my heart is – leading women’s retreats. I can’t express the anticipation I have in learning once again through Julie Johnson. I can still hear her voice from nine years ago saying, “be gentle with yourself,” and comments and questions to ask myself like, “How might God be in holy anxiety?”; “What difference does it make in my leadership that I am chosen?”; “Your deepest longing will lead you to the source,”; “What does the longing for God look like in your life?”; and this one so fitting to where I am today...”How can my leadership foster holy intentionality so we as a people can be open to God in our midst?” This is part of the calling of God in my life, not only leading women’s retreats, but helping the children in our church to live intentionally open to God.

The books I’ve read for each class have become cherished friends. The notes have been used for reference many times. My journals are filled with meditations and thoughts as they were processed in my life. The moments shared with the other participants, some whom I may never see on this earth again, are great treasures. The course work, the readings, the reflections, have all become an essential part of who I am. But most of all, I am grateful that I can say that I have experienced the “great exchange” – my anxious thoughts and busy life for peace and joy and the lavish love of my Beloved.

I am grateful for this wonderful program at Columbia Theological Seminary that Ben Johnson began so many years ago. I pray that it continues to

grow and provide the spiritual climate for others, thirsty for God and available to Him to share the ultimate thirst quencher with those He sends our way.