

# How Body Awareness Informs the Practice of Spiritual Direction

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Integrated Essay

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<sup>1</sup> The format of this essay follows directives from APA style, 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Due to the fact that this essay is not a research paper, I have taken the liberty of omitting an abstract and freely formatting the essay title and headings of parts A, B, and C in color and font.

## Introduction

I was in my early twenties and still living with my parents. One day my older sister, who moved out before she was eighteen, asked me: “Andi, how do you feel at home? Doesn’t the situation affect you?” I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about and answered that I feel okay. I was fine. She looked at me as if she knew more than she was saying, but she kept quiet. My time would come. And it came. As a heady young man I was largely disconnected from my emotions. I had developed an **avoidant attachment style** (Luebbert, 2003) to survive the dysfunctional aspects of my family. Today I am forty-three. When I look back and consider my psycho-spiritual development (Liebert, 2000), I see how the focus on my spiritual life has increasingly turned inward, toward my body. The recommended self-reflection in silent retreats, contemplative prayer forms and Scripture meditations, receiving Spiritual Direction, my training in Spiritual Direction, and the practice of Focusing, were especially significant in fostering an attitude in me that has been such a necessary and healing antipole to the way I had learned to live when I was young, when I was either **oblivious to my body or adopted compulsive patterns in order to feel good**. The question **“How were you moved in prayer?”** was a turning point for me, when I heard it the first time. This question still challenges me to **focus on my emotions and to express them to God, which is the most basic practice in order to grow into a loving relationship with God (and, of course, with others too)** – a kindergarten lesson in emotional intelligence, which I have had to catch up on as an adult.

A few years ago I came in contact with the practice of Focusing, gaining new insight into my bodily self. Eugene Gendlin’s description of the *felt sense* (2007) and Dan Siegel’s distinction between categorical emotions (fear, anger, sadness, joy, and disgust) and primary emotions

(sensation-based feelings of attraction and avoidance – “good”, “bad”, “okay”) (Hartzell & Siegel, 2003), helped me immensely in becoming more aware of and distinguishing between my own inner capacities. I found that, even if I sometimes have trouble expressing categorical emotions, it is relatively easy for me to tune in to the bodily felt sense of a situation, a personal interaction, or when I am moved by a Scripture text or during prayer. These insights enriched my social life and my faith very much. Body awareness has become for me a new doorway into my inner life. Body awareness has helped me to understand and experience myself as a whole person; I am a body-mind-unity with the Holy Spirit immanent in me, interconnected with the people and creation around me. Through body awareness I feel more awake or in tune to recognize the inner movements of the Holy Spirit, which St. Ignatius called consolations. Body awareness has helped me to become more aware of the differing thought processes I have and the emotions connected to these, a helpful tool for the practice of discernment<sup>2</sup>. Body awareness has made me more sensitive to the body language of others. Finally, body awareness has become a helpful instrument for companioning people in pastoral work and in the ministry of Spiritual Direction. This final point is the focus of this essay: How growing body awareness informs the practice of Spiritual Direction.

The content of this essay draws heavily on learnings from my time with the CSP community at Creighton. Several classes were very important for me, for example, *Theology of the Spiritual Exercises, Focusing* (especially the work of McMahon & Campbell), *Discernment of Spirits, Spirituality and Sexuality*, and the *Pre- and Post-practicum*. I benefited greatly from the kind but assertive encouragement to engage in emotional in-depth self-reflection, an integral

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<sup>2</sup> “...a discernment process that neglects the data of the physical self is seriously flawed.” (Au & Cannon Au, 2006)

part of almost all of the CSP classes. Besides that, this essay includes learning experiences and examples from my Spiritual Direction practicum. Additionally, the *Transforming Trauma* class I took at Eastern Mennonite University was also very enlightening. There I had the chance to draw from contemporary psychological thought (Trauma Theory, Attachment Theory, and Neuroscience) and the Mennonite concept of Restorative Justice. During that time I attended ten sessions of trauma therapy (*Somatic Experiencing*) that addressed the topic of transference examined on pages 18 ff. Finally, I want to mention how beneficial it was for me to practice Focusing in Focusing-partnerships at Creighton and throughout the year at the place I live. This essay can be seen as an expression for where I have been feeling led by the Holy Spirit in my own spiritual journey the last three years – exploring the Spirit's dwelling in my body and reflecting on a body-sensitive approach to Spiritual Direction.

This essay is intended to be a help for spiritual directors as they reflect on their own direction practice and to encourage further discoveries in the emotional – embodied – communication with God in us. I hope that my perspective on these topics, admittedly a limited and fragmentary view, may be inspiring for the reader.

After a brief introduction about the role of the body in spirituality, the essay develops the main themes: Part A is about the physical sensibility to the movements of the Holy Spirit and the bodily perception of consolations. Part B is about the importance of body awareness for the spiritual director in the direction process. A few verbatim excerpts provide examples to my theses. Part C focuses on awareness towards a directee's body language and the implications of this. At each end of these parts I added a personal note, giving an example of

how the described content has been significant in my own personal life and/or in my spiritual direction ministry.

## Part A: The Role of the Body in Spirituality

*"...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God..." (1. Cor 6:19)*

*"The way we relate to our bodily selves profoundly influences the way we relate to God, to one another, to prayer, to all of life" (Flora Slosson Wuellner: 1987).*

God became human in the person Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was God "in carne", embodying God's love and expressing God's love to the people around him. Jesus completed his work for our salvation on Pentecost, sending the Holy Spirit to the Christian community. The Holy Spirit is the life giving, life correcting and ordering, healing, reconciling, consoling, encouraging, and missional force within the church community and within the individual members of the community (Hauser, 1986). The apostle Paul teaches the church how to live as disciples of Christ according to the Spirit ("If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" Gal 5:25). He emphasizes God's presence in the temple of our bodies (1 Cor 6:19) and describes the work of the Spirit in us as the growing of fruits, which are inner attitudes overflowing to our neighbors in acts of love (Gal 5:22). The Holy Spirit is God "in carne" in the believers, who themselves embody and mediate God's love in human love.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit within us moves us through the inner faculties of our body-mind unity: our imagination, memory, intellect, will (directed through desires and needs), and feelings. Humans have the capacity for experiencing

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<sup>3</sup> "All human loving is mediated by our embodied experience" (Slosson Wuellner, 1987, p. 10). Love is received and expressed through the body.

a vast array of inner sensations. In this essay I concentrate on these inner feelings and on how the Holy Spirit uses these to move us.

### **1. What We Can Become Aware Of**

We can become aware of physical sensations that arise through stimuli from outside the body and from within the body. Our five senses process external information: sight, taste, smell, sound and touch. But a closer look at human physiology reveals that we have more than just five senses. We can become aware of physical sensations that arise from within the body, stemming from internal receptors (Levine, 2010, p. 139f). Kinesthetic receptors signal the state of tension in our muscles. Proprioceptive receptors transmit to our brains positional information about our joints. Vestibular receptors (hairs in the inner ear) let us sense gravity and changes in velocity (i.e., acceleration and deceleration). Finally, we have visceral receptors (viscera and blood vessels) which relay information from our “heart and guts” upward to our brains. I believe that especially the kinesthetic and visceral sensations (felt muscle tensions and “heart and gut feelings”) are keys for becoming more aware of the movement and leading of the Holy Spirit – but more on that later.

Sensations from outside of and inside our body affect us and can evoke different forms of emotions: We can feel the categorical emotions fear, anger, sadness, joy, and disgust in different intensities and shades. In addition, we are able to sense primary emotions or bodily states on a continuum between the poles of attraction and avoidance: I feel “good”, “okay”, or “bad” (Hartzell & Siegel, 2010). Levine (2010) calls this realm of primary emotions “Contours of Feelings”. Gendlin (2007) uses the term “felt sense”.

### **2. The Emotional Phenomenon “Felt Sense”**

A felt sense is primarily a physical (not mental) experience. Every person is influenced by felt sense in their everyday lives, but we are usually not very aware of it and how powerfully it informs our decisions.

Felt sense is “a murky, hard to describe, more-than-words experience that is broader and vaguer than emotion” (Gendlin & Weiser Cornell, 2014). It is a body-sense of meaning, it feels meaningful, but is illusive (Gendlin, 2007, p. 11). A felt sense is usually evoked through a situation, a person, a memory, a dream, and so on. “Gendlin’s felt sense is similar to what is popularly referred to as intuition, an inner grasp or insight into the nature of some reality without detailed analysis... a big round unclear feeling” (Au & Cannon Au, 2006, p. 83). A felt sense is a pre-conceptual, an implicit feeling. A felt sense is embodied knowing, it can reveal “the wisdom of the body”.<sup>4</sup>

A person can focus on a felt sense (that is called Focusing), which means directing her or his awareness toward this special kind of feeling in an accepting and loving attitude. In Focusing the felt sense can become a door into “more”, into a deeper realm, evoking conceptual emotions, releasing tension, revealing images, symbols, and meaning. In the focusing process, hidden bits of subconscious personal knowledge can rise up to the level of conscious awareness – a “transfer” of knowledge takes place from body to mind (Gendlin, 2007, p. 29).

Peter Levine, founder of the trauma therapy “Somatic Experiencing”, describes the physical faculties through which the phenomenon of felt sense occurs. Levine explains the connections between our sensitivity in our torso (that is, the enteric or visceral nervous system)

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<sup>4</sup> “For Gendlin and others the body is viewed as an indwelling intelligence with its own remarkable sense of rightness and acute feeling for enlivening solutions.” (Au & Cannon Au, 2006, p. 84)



and the brain. The enteric nervous system is approximately the size of a cat's brain. It produces 95% of the body's serotonin (that is, feel good hormone) and is 90 % made up of sensory nerves. These nerves communicate information about the state of the viscera to the brain. Levine states that the sensory information of our torso influences the entire brain and is the reason for subliminal "decisions" that profoundly influence our actions. "Many of our likes and dislikes, our attractions and repulsions, as well as our irrational fears, are the result of these implicit computations in our internal states" (Levine, 2010, p. 121)<sup>5</sup>.

Fully aligned with the revealing potential of the felt sense phenomenon, Levine (2010) goes further, to locating the source of much of our intuition in our viscera.

...gut sensations are vital in orchestrating positive feelings of aliveness and in directing our lives... As we can learn from traditional, shamanic and spiritual practices... feelings of goodness are embodied directly as visceral sensations. When we ignore our "gut instincts", it is at our own great expense. (p. 125)

**One significant thesis of this essay is to consider our torso as the main perceptive antenna for the promptings of the Holy Spirit.** Thorough Bible study, sound theological reasoning, and responsible teaching in the Church are important – all of these involve mainly left brain processing – but, I argue that a holistic spirituality needs to be complemented by emotional and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> More explanation, for example how emotional experiences of the past color our gut feelings, in Antonio Damasio: *Descartes' Error*.

<sup>6</sup> Au and Cannon Au (2006), referring to the Multiple Intelligences model of Howard Gardener, show fascinating examples how bodily-kinesthetic intelligent people came to a Spirit-lead discernment. "People who are more bodily-kinesthetically oriented in their learning, for example, process knowledge through bodily sensation" (p. 80).

Quoting Tillich, Au & Cannon Au (2006) emphasize that rational knowing (“grasping the truths of faith”) needs the complementation of embodied knowing (“being grasped by the Truth of faith”) (p. 47). Holistic discernment happens through our whole self.

This mode of [holistic] knowing is reflected in the Hebrew verb *yadah*, signifying the kind of intimate knowledge resulting from the unification of intellect, feeling, and actions.

Ignatian spirituality speaks of it as *sentir*, a felt knowledge that pervades the whole of one’s being. (Au & Cannon Au, 2006, p. 47)

With this we come to the role of the body in Ignatian Spirituality.

### 3. From an Ignatian Perspective: The Role of Body Awareness in the Discernment of Spirits

*“What fills and satisfies the soul consists not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savoring them interiorly”* (Sp. Ex., #2, in Ganns, 1991)

Ignatius taught his followers to seek the presence of God in all things, in their conversations, walks, in all they see, taste, hear, learn, and in all they do (Götz, 2001). From an Ignatian perspective, God is immanent in creation, and this includes, of course, the body. God communicates who he is “with his people both corporately and as individuals” (Barry & Conolly, 1981, p. 17). That means that we are continuously being “spoken to”. God communicates with us implicitly (when we are unaware of it) and explicitly (when we become aware of God communicating with us in a spiritual experience) (Barry & Conolly, 1981, p. 33). **Communicative experiences with God involving bodily perceptions are central in Ignatian Spirituality.**

In “Spiritual Exercises” Ignatius lays out “Rules to aid us toward perceiving and then understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul: The good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected” (#313, in

Ganns, 1991). Ignatius describes good, Holy Spirit evoked motions as consolations (Sp. Ex., # [316]). **Consolations**, as understood by Ignatius, are rooted in an experienced increase of faith (for example, “God is near. God loves me”), hope (“God will...”), and charity (“Service with God”), which are the fundamental effects of the Holy Spirit in people. Consolations can have the effect of warm feelings toward God or an increase in peace or self-acceptance<sup>7</sup>. A consoled person can respond more easily in accordance with faith, hope, and love. Consolations give enthusiasm for prayer and active service for God and neighbor (Toner, 1995, p. 22)<sup>8</sup>.

In terms of Attachment Theory<sup>9</sup>, consolations can be seen as a bonding experience with God. **Consolations increase a basic sense of safety in and a stable connection with God.**<sup>10</sup> A consolation is “emotional communication”.

Daniel Siegel (2003) – one of the leading voices in Affective Neuroscience – emphasizes the importance of “emotional communication”. If two people are in tune with each other’s primary emotions (that is, sensation-based feelings of attraction and avoidance, like “good”, “bad”, “o.k.”), they experience a communal sense of joining together. Resonant connection takes place. One person experiences the other in a sensory manner. This sense can remain even if the two people separate from each other. It is an ongoing sense of connection, of linkage. In

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<sup>7</sup> The term consolation is a conceptual word which fails to describe the reality adequately. It attempts to describe a spiritual reality which is experienced by different people differently. Therefore, **every individual needs to “translate” or appropriate what consolation means for her- or himself** (K. Schaupp, *Trost und Trostlosigkeit in den Ignatianischen Exerzitien* [Consolation and Desolation in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius], personally provided lecture Script, December, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> **Desolations** are the opposite of consolations. Desolations might be inner motions like a disquiet mind, temptations, different forms of a bad mood which lead to a lack of faith, decrease of hope, or feeling of separation from God.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)

<sup>10</sup> See for example, (Moriarty, Hoffmann, & Grimes, 2006)

other words, relationship happens and deepens if there is “a process of resonance in which the emotional state of one person reverberates in that of the other” (p. 64f).

In that sense, consolations are highly relational and bonding. If a person recognizes his or her primary feelings (felt sense) in a consolation and perceives in this very feeling that God, the mysterious Other, is present in this feeling and invites the person to join, to tune in, the relationship deepens and is strengthened. The person “feels felt” and might even feel a part of God’s emotions. An ongoing sense of connection to God is possible.

I’ve experienced that, even if a person doesn’t feel God’s presence and love right now, on a deeper level a primary emotion (or knowledge with emotional quality) might still be present, confirming that God is good, that God is trustworthy, that God holds his or her life in his hands, because of an embodied memory of a moment with felt “resonance”, or as Siegel might say, a “magical moment” of successful emotional communication.<sup>11</sup>

Five hundred years before Affective Neuroscience, Ignatius was already aware of “emotional resonance”. He uses the Spanish word *sentir* to describe how consolations are perceived. *Sentir*, as used by Ignatius, can be described as a “...felt knowledge, an affective, intuitive knowledge possessed through the reaction of human feelings to exterior and interior experience... [*Sentir* describes] ...not merely an intellectual grasping of abstract propositions, but a total human experience of understanding with all of its *emotional resonance* [italics added]” (Futrell, 1970, p. 56). I am struck by the similarity between the concepts of “felt-

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<sup>11</sup> Houdek (1996) describes the Spiritual Direction of a person who suffers the “dark night of the senses”. Even if the person doesn’t feel that God is present or active, she or he still is determined to persevere in prayer, because of an *emerging “intuitive sense... [italics added]* that says it is good to be in prayer. ...Although directees may experience profound aridity..., they are clearly aware that God is communicating divine mystery in the emptiness that now constitutes prayer.” (p. 29) I would describe this *emerging intuitive sense* Houdek is talking about as bodily felt knowledge.

knowledge” and our implicit body wisdom which can be seen in the felt sense concept of Focusing.

In conclusion, a holistic spirituality is incarnational. The term consolation for an inner, directive experience of the Holy Spirit expresses the physical sensibility of this experience. A consolation feels good, it lovingly tends the body-mind unity, it is uplifting, nourishing<sup>12</sup>. Consolations are God’s way of touching, of nonverbal, implicit communication, which can become explicit when the believing person recognizes and prayerfully reflects on them. Consolations have the potential for creating and nourishing long-term bonding. In that sense consolations can be seen as sexual<sup>13</sup> expression in the relationship with God.<sup>14</sup>

I believe that consolations (as well as desolations) are perceived in the visceral nervous system – in our torso (others would say in our heart or in our soul). The bodily realm where felt senses or primary emotions are perceived is the resonating cavity, or the sounding body the Holy Spirit uses for communicating with us. A person who has a trained awareness for this realm of her or his personality is well-equipped to become a Spirit sensitive person. A believer who decides to begin with a body awareness exercise will increase the spectrum of her or his communication with God.

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<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, in Ignatius teaching there are consolations that don’t feel pleasant as well. See “sting of conscience” in Sp. Ex. # [314]

<sup>13</sup> Sexual in the sense of a sensual and intimate expression in a loving relationship

<sup>14</sup> The effect of consolations can be compared with what skin contact provides in a loving relationship. Through the experience of skin contact (an extended hug, or especially during an orgasm) the hormone oxytocin is released, which feeds and satisfies the basic human desire for a safe and long-lasting bond and builds trust. Oxytocin is released in the breast feeding mother and in the baby as well. (Amen, 2007, p. 63ff)

### Personal Note

Through the CSP Focusing class I found myself drawn to practice Focusing regularly and to anticipate the movements of the Holy Spirit in my body. Hence, my awareness for consolations and desolations in everyday life increased. An example: One morning I became very angry with my three year old daughter and yelled at her. After that I was in a bad mood for several hours. At the core of that bad mood was a critical inner voice that put me down, accusing me of practicing poor parenting skills. Later that day I was on a walk with my daughter. After a few minutes I became open, taking in the atmosphere, the smell and the light of the air that was surrounding us. Suddenly I was moved by a small, warm, upwelling sensation in my chest. Recognizing a consolation I continued walking, focusing on and savoring this felt sense and the emotional reverberation that followed. I identified an uplifting sense of hope and peace. My bad mood resolved. After a moment I asked God what He wants to show me in that. As I was giving words to the experience, trying to lift the explicit from the implicit, meaning emerged: “Andi, you will continue growing. I am with you and with Anni in her development.” That was consoling for me.

## Part B: Body Awareness in the Spiritual Direction Process

A spiritual director needs to be familiar with the depths and breadth of her or his own inner sound box and the typical sounds the Holy Spirit produces in it. A spiritual director needs to be at home in his or her body<sup>15</sup>, grounded in the present moment, in the reality of the here

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<sup>15</sup> Kepner (1993) describes in depth the phenomenon of embodiment and how a person alienates from his or her bodily being. “Most of us do not identify or experience our body as “self”. We feel ourselves often to be living *in* our body, or out of touch with our physical being altogether” (p. 12).

and now, to be a contemplative-evocative presence for the directee. In this part of the essay I describe several bodily attitudes and phenomena that influence the Spiritual Direction process. I begin with one of the most basic elements of Spiritual Direction: the central role of desire.

### 1. The Central Role of Desire

Without desire there is no Spiritual Direction. Many biblical references<sup>16</sup> and many theologians and mystics throughout history<sup>17</sup> have emphasized the central role desires and needs<sup>18</sup> play in the human heart (which is in Judeo-Christian anthropology the organ of decision-making, the source of human action) and what important gifts and guideposts they are for the faith journey.

Rolheiser (1999) defines spirituality, ultimately, as what we do with our desire. He identifies two basic feelings which are part of desire: pain and hope. Breaking down these two further, Rolheiser identifies painful aspects of our longings as dissatisfaction, frustration, and aching. The hopeful part of longing can be experienced as “deep energy, as something beautiful, as an inexorable pull, more important than anything else inside us, toward love, beauty, creativity, and a future beyond our limited present” (p. 5).

Schaupp (2006) describes how desires and needs can have different layers and point in different directions. A self-reflective person can recognize, for example, the desire for safety and security as well as for freedom and independence (p. 58). When a person contemplatively

<sup>16</sup> E.g.: Hebrew word for person (nāphās) means throat or opened mouth. It expresses connection between “life” and “yearning”. See Jeremia 31:25 / Jesus asks disciples about their spiritual desire: John 1:38 / Beatitudes.

<sup>17</sup> See love mystical interpreters of the Song of Songs (Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila). Others, who emphasize the central role of desire: Augustine, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, or the Bridal Mystics (e.g. Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg) (Ruffing, 2000, p. 101).

<sup>18</sup> Sheldrake (1994) states that desires “undoubtedly overlap with our needs and neediness, although it is still possible to distinguish between them” (p. 12).

focuses on the bodily feeling of the desire, different, maybe ambivalent, desires with varying strengths and directions can become obvious.<sup>19</sup>

Sheldrake (1994) makes the point that our desires are “inevitably linked to our physical senses, which in turn connect us to the world of time and space. ...all desire is *sensual*” (p. 13). Consequently, sensing one’s own desires is the starting point in Spiritual Direction, from which contemplative-evocative practice begins.

In conclusion, desires are a life-giving energy which the Holy Spirit uses to lead us toward God. Body awareness is the capacity we already have and which we can cultivate to become utterly available for following the direction in which our God-given desires want to lead and empower us.

## **2. Transference of Fear through Body Posture and Facial Expression**

Barry and Conolly (1981) describe the phenomenon of transference as one of the most effective ways a person resists growth in his or her relationship with the Lord. Through the examples in this and the following chapter I emphasize the bodily aspects of transference and show how body awareness helps, first, to recognize a transference reaction within a Spiritual Direction relationship, and, second, to live in this awareness in social interactions until God gives healing.

I was sitting with a directee from an African country who had experienced traumatic events during a war. Especially during our first sessions, we both sat there quite rigidly. The

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<sup>19</sup> Au & Cannon Au (2006) address the complexity and ambivalence of desires. They offer help to sort out “the jumbled mixture of desires, dreams, hopes, needs” (p. 138) in distinguishing between wishful, instinctual, tentative, and definitive desires (p. 141ff). Margaret Silf’s concept of root desires and branch desires is helpful as well (in Au & Cannon Au, 2006, p. 144).



directee's posture and his eyes expressed alertness, which evoked in me a similar emotional state.

Peter Levine (2010) describes fear-based body reactions and their significance in a therapeutic session. The foundation of nonverbal communication is that **one's posture and facial muscles are a highly potent means for signaling emotional states to another person.** Levine shows how expressions of alertness or fear can transfer and evoke in the other potent fear-based reactions.

The opposite is true as well. When the spiritual director expresses grace and acceptance, or is grounded in a basic trust that "all things will be well", the directee becomes calmed by the ease of the director (p. 43).

Levine emphasizes **how important it is that the therapist (spiritual director) is aware of this phenomenon of "postural tuning" in nonverbal communication.** "A therapist who is not aware of how his or her own body reacts to (i. e., resonates with) fear, rage, helplessness and shame in another person will not be able to guide..." (p. 42). In addition, if the therapist takes on a self-protective stance, in other words, is not willing to acknowledge and accept the transferred emotions, she or he **unconsciously blocks the client (directee) from processing them.** "Therapists **must learn, from their own successful encounter with their own traumas, to stay present with their clients.** This is the reason healing trauma must necessarily engage the awareness of the living, sensing, "knowing" body in both client and therapist" (p. 42).

A bodily-aware spiritual director can learn to distinguish between sensations evoked by the content of the directee's sharing, which are connected to his or her own wounds from the past (that would be "classical" transference), and sensations which don't have primarily to do

with unfinished business of the director, but occurred as empathic resonance.<sup>20</sup> I think noticing muscle tension is especially meaningful in the Spiritual Direction process when considering transferred fear. Fear reactions like alertness or vigilance involve muscle contractions.

The following excerpt is an example of how I became aware of my body tension during a spiritual direction session, which became a doorway for further insights:

*“While I pray for the directee at the end of our meeting I sense a surprisingly strong body tension. It feels like I am sitting, resting with just the left side of my body on the chair. The rest of my weight I carry through muscle tension. As I recognize this I deliberately relax muscles in my pelvic area and abdomen, breath deeper and settle a bit more down into the chair. It works a bit, not fully. I wonder: What is this? Why am I tense?”*

*As I reflected on this experience after the meeting I realize that I don’t understand fully the reason for the body tension. It might have to do something with my own attitude, wanting badly to help and/or avoiding making mistakes. The opposite of this body tension would be a relaxed position of letting go, of trusting God’s Grace for the journey of the directee. Another thought: Could it be that I intend my prayer more as a means to encourage the directee (a blessing that I need to provide) than it is prayer to God? This is a point to bring up in supervision.*

In conclusion, a bodily-aware spiritual director is familiar with how his or her own body reacts to stress and carries personal fears. This felt knowledge equips the director to recognize fear reactions, like body tension, which is transferred from the body posture and facial expressions of the directee. When a director mirrors back to the directee parts of what she or he perceived, it can become a bottom-up<sup>21</sup> doorway into healing. The directee can become

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<sup>20</sup> Levine (2010) points out that “[we] all subconsciously mirror the postures of others and register them as sensations in our own bodies. This occurs presumably through the operation of mirror neurons and postural resonance” (146). A brief explanation of empathic resonance, see Goleman (2006), p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Bottom-up processing (= phenomenological approach) is the opposite of top-down processing, which starts with rational reflection on an issue (Levine, 2010, p. 45)

aware of a semi-conscious body sensation, like “not feeling safe”. This awareness can become a contemplative-evocative space for the Holy Spirit who is working to resolve fear-based tensions and to re-build basic trust: “Don’t be afraid”.

In the following example I reflect on a phenomenon I recognize in myself. It is a special case of a fear-based body reaction which is very important for the Spiritual Direction process: Transference of fear of authority figures.

### 3. Example How the Body Demonstrates a Transference Reaction with an Authority Figure

Spiritual Direction is a helping relationship. The help seeker (directee) meets the helper (spiritual director) as an authority person, whether the directee is consciously aware of this or not. In every helping relationship, neural networks associated with authority figures (parents, other significant caregivers, current bosses, etc.) become activated. This means that a person who experienced violence through an authority figure can react to the helper in maladaptive ways. The helper’s body language, or the simple fact of her or his presence, can trigger bodily sensations and behaviors in the help-seeker conditioned by the past.

The same is true for the relationship to God, the ultimate authority. A person may have a “positive conceptual knowledge of God as loving, gracious, and caring” (Garzon, 2007), yet have an image of God (a subjective emotional experience of God, often active on a semi-conscious level,) which is negatively influenced through transference. Ambivalent emotions toward God, like desire for and fear of intimacy, can be explained that way.

The good news is that counterconditioning can build “new neural connections and... reduces the firing of maladaptive components of pathologically triggered (neuronal) networks” (Garzon, 2007). This means that positive experiences in a spiritual direction relationship “may

change the composition of neural networks associated with authority figures and thus change one's God image even when God is not brought up directly" (Garzon, 2007).

Healing of a maladaptive God image in Spiritual Direction happens when the directee becomes aware of this transferred authority dynamic and realizes the connection to hurt in the past. Healing happens when the directee is helped to make sense of a mixture of conflicting feelings (that is, working through transference issues) and is provided with positive, corrective, emotional experiences within a safe director-directee relationship (Moriarty, Hoffmann, & Grimes, 2006, p. 52).

The body can be the directee's key for recognizing her or his transferred reactions. Again, fear reactions can be identified through the recognition of muscle tension. Conflicting feelings are accessible if the directee gains a felt sense of her or his desire for God and, concurrently, hesitation toward God.

Transference was for me a somewhat obscure topic. Through body awareness I gained a handle on my own transference issues with my spiritual director (and other authority figures). Theoretical explanations about the reason for transference (top-down) would never have brought me to the place of finally noticing my body tension (transferred fear) as part of my story. When I now become aware of my body tension in social interactions, I accept it, and hold it briefly up to God who is in charge of my further healing. Then I consciously take a few deep breaths, sensing the movement in my abdomen, which relaxes some of these tensions, and return to my conversation partner as well as I can.

I became aware that I am living with a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7), fear-based body tension, an insecurity that I inherited and which shows up in some social

interactions. What I have been regarding as weakness has become a bodily state that I accept, so that Christ's strengths can come to completion in my vulnerability.

Through body awareness, fear dynamics, which have had their power on a subconscious level, surface into the realm of awareness. There they might resolve through God's grace, or at least lose some of their subtle force and can be befriended to a certain degree.

#### 4. The Connection between Body Posture and Emotion

There is neuro-scientific evidence of the connection between one's postures, gestures, facial expressions and emotional states. The social psychologist Amy Cuddy (2012) shows one example of the interrelationship between posture and emotion. In her work on *power posing*, Cuddy proves how the levels of testosterone and cortisol change if a person deliberately takes on a posture which expresses power. An insecure person can feel a little bit more confident after changing her or his body position for just a few seconds.

The German Benedictine Anselm Grün (2002) explains in his book *Prayer Postures (Gebetsgebärden)* the posture-emotion interplay in prayer. He suggests many different postures or gestures which express nonverbally a desire to God, or expressing a counter-movement to an inclination that the praying person wants to become freed from. For example, a posture of lying on the floor with arms spread and open and palms freeing up might resonate with a desire to accept one's own vulnerability or letting go of control.

The following examples demonstrate how the concentration on postures or gestures in Spiritual Direction became an evocative path for God's work in the directee.

##### **Example 1: Trust gesture.**

A pastor was sharing with me that the theme of “trusting God” is currently important for him. He shared about a situation in which he was giving counseling to a person in his congregation. During a particular session he felt incapable of helping that person to calm down and the need to trust God that God is at work in that person. As he was explaining why he thinks he has trouble trusting God more deeply, he reasoned that it probably has something to do with his childhood with an alcoholic, emotionally absent father. As I listened to his story I didn’t connect with what he was saying emotionally, and the directee seemed to be in a similar disconnected state, as if he was used to talking about his past, but without sensing the pain of this father-wound. Since I was unable to identify a particular point to focus on, I suggested the following:

*“P., I have an idea. Would it be o.k. for you to do a little experiment? (He agreed, showing a surprised or curious look.) You say that you sense that God invites you to trust him more. Can we enter now into a silent prayer time? I would like to invite you to go back to that counseling session you mentioned and to that moment in which you felt frustrated and incapable. You can close your eyes, if you want. Can you reconnect to that moment in which you sensed that God was inviting you to trust him? When you are ready, find a body posture which expresses for you trust. A posture that feels right. Take your time. When you are ready, just give me a sign, o.k.?”*

(After a few seconds he indicates that he is ready. He sits in his chair, eyes closed, slightly leaned back against the back rest, his legs are crossed the ankles, his arms and hands rest on his thighs, the palms of his hands are turned upward, in a receiving posture.)

*P., now I invite you to take your time and to **feel how this posture feels inside of you**. Just sensing how it is to be in this trusting posture? Remain there for a while. (He nods)*

(After a minute of silence I interrupt). ***If you want to, you can adjust your position***. (He uncrosses his legs and remains silent. After another minute I speak.)

*As you are in this posture, body prayer, you might get a sense for what God is like for you right now... Take your time, when you are finished just give me a sign.*

(After approximately five minutes he opens his eyes and smiles.)

*What happened in you during this prayer time?"*

He answered, *"At first, I felt very comfortable in this position. I sensed how my hands became warm and heavy. After a while it was like Jesus was moving his hands under mine, carrying me. His hands held me as I was trusting. It was a wonderful image. I will take this image with me and want to meditate on it further."*

### **Example 2: Reaching out – reaching in.**

The following verbatim excerpt demonstrates how the reflection on a gesture became evocative for a directee (L.) who was in a difficult family situation.

<b>Reaction</b>	<b>Conversation</b>
	L3: ... I could say that I experience God with me the most in the reflection on my day
	A3: Can you say more about that. What are you doing in your reflection?
Very awake I am moved by this gesture, and think of her expressing her needs... I feel compassion	L4: I lay there in my bed and stretch out my arms... It is like magic, it really works. I don't know why it is that this gesture helps me... (tears appear in her eyes)
	A4: You stretch out your arms. What is this gesture for you? What does it express?
A little unsettled about general talk	L5: Hm... Isn't it a general gesture? The Bible says "Ask and you will receive?" ...
	A5: What is it for you? Are you reaching out? Asking for help?
Waiting	L6: ... Maybe
	A6: When you do that, what is God like for you?
Joy	L7: ... It is like something from the outside goes inside... He reaches in.
	A7: He reaches in... How does this affect you?

	L8: A good question... It is calming, caring, like my father was for me.
Empathy	A8: calming, caring

### Personal Note

Several CSP classes helped me gain body awareness in my practice of Spiritual Direction, including the following classes in particular: Pre- and Post-Practicum; Discernment of Spirits; Centering Prayer; Spirituality and Sexuality. In all of these classes I have been directed toward realizing and verbalizing my inner reactions in my own prayer life and in my Spiritual Direction practice. Thus, CSP helped me become more emotionally articulate. This, in turn, has helped me invite others to talk about their spiritual experiences, and to relate their sensations with a communicating God. One little sentence by Sr. Kathleen McAlpin became a treasure for me: *“Stay with the emotions and God will show up.”*

## Part C: Awareness of a Directee’s Body Language

Many therapy forms work with the body language of a client. Therapists are trained in body reading and use this information for their interventions. I think that spiritual directors would benefit very much from some of the wisdom that is discovered by these body sensitive therapies<sup>22</sup>. In this chapter I describe just a few rudimentary insights from the field of body reading and their implications for Spiritual Direction.

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<sup>22</sup> I mean, for example, Gestalt Therapy or trauma therapy forms in the field of Somatic Psychology, like Somatic Experiencing (Peter Levine) or Sensorimotor Psychotherapy (Pat Ogden & Kekuni Minton).



Levine (2010) lists five channels of body language: gestures, facial expression, posture, autonomic signals (changes in breathing and heart rate), and visceral behavior (intestinal sounds) (p. 143ff). Tilda Norberg (2006), the founder of Gestalt Pastoral Care<sup>23</sup>, defines body reading as:

...the practice of looking at a body with the intent of seeing or intuiting physical locations for emotional and spiritual pain, and the health that is surely there. In reading a body we ask what combination of life experiences, unhealed pain, growth accomplished, and need for growth this body might be showing us. (p. 227)

One of the basic principles of body reading is that all expressed feelings are expressed bodily. A spiritual director can become attuned to being acutely aware of the body expression of a feeling (for example, saggy shoulders and arms, shallow breath, tears, voice, tense and shortened muscles<sup>24</sup>). Especially the moments in which the emotional state changes (a “fragile dawn” or its “suffocation”) can become the starting point for evocative questions or a contemplative silence during the session (p. 229). When the spiritual director mirrors what she or he observed and sensed, the directee is led into self-reflection. One helpful question might be, for example, how this “outside” posture feels on the “inside”.

Another principle of body reading is the awareness that the body has the capacity to record emotions:

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<sup>23</sup> Gestalt Pastoral Care is an integration of Gestalt work, healing prayer, and spiritual direction. See: *Consenting to Grace: An Introduction to Gestalt Pastoral Care*. Norberg gives helpful tips how to get started with paying attention to bodies.

<sup>24</sup> Kepner (1993) describes how tensing muscles is the bodily nature of repression. The movements that naturally would follow feelings of love, anger, and compassion (for example, reaching out to others) can be physically prevented through tensing against them. (p. 14)

When a person denies the expression of emotion, it tends to become embodied in the person's muscles... the body mobilizes to store the unexpressed feeling. In order to hold in a feeling, muscles must shorten, a body tightens up to contain the feeling in various physical locations. (Norberg, 2006, p. 230)<sup>25</sup>

A spiritual director who knows about this connection and has personally experienced "frozen emotions" becoming released in prayer, or the dissolving of "stored" stress, can begin facilitating healing through the channel God has endowed in our bodies. Norberg (2006) argues that "...simple body awareness can lead directly to one's growth agenda" (p. 16).

I am only at the beginning in consciously becoming aware of some body language of directees and then integrating my observations into the way I ask questions. A few examples show how already rudimentary observations can be beneficial in the Spiritual Direction process.

### **Example 1: Discrepancy between the Verbal Message and Body Language of the Directee**

The following example shows how it can be beneficial to mirror back the body language of a directee. A young man was "doing his best" to answer my questions regarding the emotional aspects of a consoling moment he experienced by using the phrase "I feel". However, after using the phrase, he seldom expressed true feelings. At one point during our conversation I noticed a body gesture: as he was saying "In my mind I..." he laid his right hand over his solar plexus. I was moved by this gesture. I desired to connect with what he was explaining on an emotional level. After he finished the sentence I replied: *"I just saw you making an interesting gesture. You said 'In my mind...' but put your hand there* (I showed him

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<sup>25</sup> Some forms of massage therapy and body work (e.g. Rolfing, Lomi Bodywork, or Alexander Technique) know about embodiment and work with the shortened muscles and postures of a person to facilitate emotional healing.

the gesture). *Can we stay here for a while? What were you sensing as you...?*" I led his attention back to my initial question about a specific consoling moment. As I said this, he looked surprised, put his hand back on his chest and let it there for quite a while as he continued to explain what he had experienced. It seemed to me that the sharing he did after that brief intervention was more connected with his emotional level.

### **Example 2: Collapse Shows Maladaptive God Image**

In another example the body language of a directee indicates an inhibiting God image. A Theology student described a series of joyful events she experienced since our last meeting. One of the events was a relaxing trip to a beautiful place in nature with her boyfriend. Another was a fulfilling meeting with people she didn't know beforehand. At one point I asked her: "K., when you think of these beautiful experiences you just shared, what could be God's invitation for you in the midst of these experiences?" I was surprised by what followed. *Before she answered, her body posture collapsed significantly, she exhaled, her shoulders bent forward. I could sense heaviness in my body as she answered something about establishing a prayer discipline.*

*Sharing this observation with the directee would hopefully lead her to realize and give voice to her body's expression, which might be different from her conceptual beliefs about how God is.*

### **Personal Note**

I am increasingly aware of what the body language of a directee evokes in me. Sometimes I notice *nonverbal cues which I feel in my body and which help me to discern which way to go, or what question to ask.* Here is an example: A women was verbalizing two inner

voices she has. Alternately taking a seat on two chairs, she gave voice to a demanding part of herself, which was requiring her to be more disciplined in her faith life. The other voice in that polarity was smaller, more questioning. A little rebellious to the demanding part, the second voice wanted the freedom to enjoy life. As I was observing the dialogue, the postures of the directee evoked in me a strong sensation. The one side felt heavy, my shoulders collapsed a little. The other side felt so much lighter and life giving. It became clear to me what the Holy Spirit was inviting the woman to in that moment.

### Conclusion

*A person asks her own body: Who are you?*

*"I am your friend and closest partner... I am the truth-teller. I witness to you your unknown self.*

*I am the faithful messenger and recorder of your memories,  
your powers, your hurts, your needs, your limits...*

*I am a gift-giver. Through me, you live and move in God's creation.*

*I am your partner in stress and pain.*

*I carry much of your suffering, so your spirit does not need to carry it all alone.*

*I am one of the major ways by which God abides with you,  
speaks to you, touches you, unites with you.*

*Far from separating you from your spiritual life, I open it to you.*

*You can pray with me, for me, through me."*

*(from a prayer of Flora Slosson Wuellner, 1986, p. 16f)*

God is transcendent and immanent. God is self-communicating, moving us through outer realities (Creation, Scripture, life circumstances, human relationships...) and through inner realities (imagination, (day-) dreams, thoughts, body sensations...) (Conroy,n.d.). Whatever the form, God communicates with us through the faculties of our body.

It is through body awareness exercises (like Focusing)<sup>26</sup> that we become more aware of the faculties of our body which usually are active on a sub- or semiconscious level, informing many of our spontaneous, intuitive, and inspired reactions. It is through body awareness exercises that we train ourselves to become more aware of our sensitive capacities which the indwelling Holy Spirit uses to touch, and to lead us.

The Holy Spirit is the protagonist, our chest is the stage; the observer is our self-aware and self-reflective mind. Another analogy: The Holy Spirit is the musician, our visceral nervous system is the finely tuned instrument; our body-aware mind is the trained ear which is able to concentrate on minimal nuances.

Body awareness informs the practice of Spiritual Direction in many ways:

- A growing awareness of bodily sensations, especially in our torso (that is, sensations from the visceral nervous system and from kinesthetic receptors [muscle tensions]) is equivalent to a growing sensitivity for the movements of the Holy Spirit.
- Body awareness exercises foster spirituality by training our receptive communication skills. This is a prerequisite for becoming responsive in our relationship with God.
- Body awareness exercises foster a contemplative stance, they make us perceptive. Body awareness centers us in the present moment, in the reality of the here and now.
- Body awareness opens us for the wisdom of our body, for embodied knowing through the felt sense of life situations.

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<sup>26</sup> Many body awareness exercises can serve the same purpose of becoming more bodily attuned to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Other examples are Feldenkrais, Eutony, or Alexander Technique.

- Through body awareness, the phenomenon of fear transference becomes accessible (bottom-up).
- Body awareness opens up the meaning of body language. Facial expressions, postures, gestures can become a doorway into a deeper self- and God-knowledge.
- Body awareness can help in discovering wounds of the past. Disowned emotions can surface and the push of the Holy Spirit toward healing can become tangible.<sup>27</sup>
- Greater body awareness makes the practice of Spiritual Direction (and the whole life) more vibrant, nuanced, and spontaneous<sup>28</sup>.

Spiritual directors would benefit from training in body awareness and body reading. Basic knowledge about anatomy and our sensual capacities would be helpful as well. Embodied spiritual directors can lead directees and retreatants deeper into the temple of the Holy Spirit, helping them find that inner homeland where God dwells, where divine encounters happen.

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<sup>27</sup> See many encouraging examples in Norberg, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> If a person has developed a good sense for the inner movements she or he is quicker to respond to these impressions. This person is more spontaneous, quicker to react intuitively.

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