

The Center for Spiritual Formation

The Ministry of Spiritual Direction

Year 1

Discerning the Dark Night

with Rev. Dr. Russell Hart

Saturday, April 11, 2026

How do we recognize and journey with someone experiencing a dark night of the soul?

This session will examine two classical approaches to God, the apophatic and the kataphatic, and explore the nature of Divine Union, which is all God's work and not our own.

SATURDAY SESSION:

For this month's "Dark Night" session, you will need to view the movie "Winter Light" directed by Ingmar Bergman prior to class, and reflect on the following spiritual exercise.

I have found three ways for you to watch the movie online.

- You can rent it for a small fee on Youtube. It's \$2.99 for SD or \$3.99 for HD.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwJ1wDwq8-A>
- It is also available www.criterionchannel.com. They have a 14-day free trial. So, you could sign up for that; just be sure to cancel after you watch the movie. (Don't be like me and forget to cancel. Then after months of paying a fee, I finally remember to cancel.)
- There is a website www.kanopy.com, which claims you can watch it if you have a public library card. I haven't tried it as you have to provide your password for your library card, and I had never set that up.
- You can also do your own search to see if you can find a way of viewing for free online. This information changes from time to time, so it is best to check on your own.

Spiritual Exercise # 1

Winter Light—A Film by Ingmar Bergman, 1962

This film, which takes place in a small seacoast village in Sweden during the winter, has two central characters: A Lutheran minister, Pastor Thomas Ericson, and his girlfriend Marta Lundberg, the local schoolteacher. Pastor Thomas is still grieving the loss of his wife to cancer four years earlier, and it has turned him into a bitter, joyless man. He is at once irritated by and dependent upon the needy Marta. The film chronicles the cold, austere effects of his ministry, which is scarcely warmer than the weather. He is disappointed in himself, angry with God and oblivious to the needs of the village. The many opportunities where he might “do” spiritual direction simply pass him by. But spiritual direction *does* occur, from unexpected people and in surprising ways.

As you watch the film:

Consider what transpires in light of Robert F. Morneau’s ten principles of spiritual direction [see next page]: *Morneau, Robert F., Spiritual Direction: A Path to Maturity, © 1988, Crossroad, NY, Ch. 4, pps. 78-97*

1. Identify the instances where pastor Thomas does *not* do spiritual direction when given the opportunity to do so, and be prepared to discuss what he might have done on those instances.
2. Identify who—whether intentionally or unintentionally—*does* offer spiritual direction, and be prepared to discuss why you think that it is spiritual direction.
3. Decide whether or not pastor Thomas is undergoing a “dark night of the soul” and be prepared to discuss why or why not.

The Ten Principles of Spiritual Direction:

Morneau, Robert F., Spiritual Direction: A Path to Spiritual Maturity, Crossroad, NY, 1998

1. Spiritual Direction is an interpersonal process of growth in which God's call is heard and responded to in faith;
2. SD attempts to foster a courageous and discerning heart that seeks to discover and achieve God's will;
3. SD is primarily concerned with integrated growth in faith rather than solve problems or manage crises;
4. SD is effective when growth manifests itself in the increase of love, fidelity and responsible care;
5. SD is concerned with disposition, experience and process [pps. 86-88], *see below*;
6. SD provides an atmosphere on unconditional love;
7. SD is primarily the work of the Spirit, where the director facilitates and does not obstruct the action of grace;
8. SD stimulates faith development with accountability, specificity, and realistic expectations;
9. SD contains a highly communal and ecclesial dimension [is centered in a community of faith];
10. SD fosters a vision that is global and eschatological, immanent and transcendent.

D=Disposition; E=Experience; P=Process

Disposition: The reason why the horse led to water did not drink was that it lacked the proper disposition. The Spiritual Director is constantly sensitive to the disposition of the directee, and checks out the temperature of his/her soul.

Experience: Preoccupation with the self causes us to miss many an experience of the Holy. Entire seasons of one's life can be missed because of being "out of sorts" and moody. Spiritual Directors need to be attuned to the presence of those preoccupations which prevent the directee from tasting life to the full.

Process: What we do and what happens to us must be reflected upon and examined for meaning and then appropriated. Spiritual Direction is an explicit time of *processing*—What happens in direction models a pattern that should characterize the directee's entire journey.