A Contemporary Approach to Spiritual Direction Supervision: The MESH Model
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When I was nine years old, my Hebrew school friend Joanne and I confided in each other that we wanted to become rabbis. We shared a feeling of deep knowing about this vocational calling, and we sat down with the senior rabbi to seek his counsel and guidance. We were unaware that women rabbis were not yet a reality in the United States in 1971. He told us with unrestrained condescension that we could not be rabbis because we were girls, but that perhaps one day we could marry a rabbi. I left his office feeling bereft. How could I feel so sure about this calling, only to hear that my gender was seen as unholy, unworthy, and incongruous with being a rabbi?

If only I had had a trustworthy mentor to nurture this earliest experience of calling.

Many years later, I began meeting with a spiritual director and reached out to the Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, USA, about applying to its training program. Eventually I submitted my application, and in 2001, three days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I began my spiritual direction formation and training program. My years at Mercy Center transformed my inner and outer life in extraordinary ways, and I returned there in 2009 to complete my supervision training. My own faith journey has shaped my passion for an innovative, progressive, more contemporary model of supervision.

The Landscape of Spiritual Direction Supervision

At Mercy Center (including supervision training), every effort was made to be inclusive and welcoming, but there were overt and subtle reminders of Christian hegemony at every turn, not only in the theology and pedagogy, but also in the readings, music, poetry, and group prayers. I felt like a welcomed guest, but I always the “other” and sometimes a stranger. Rabbis Bonita Taylor and David Zucker write about a similar experience in clinical pastoral education (CPE) supervision in their article “Nearly Everything We Wish Our Non-Jewish Supervisors Had Known about Us as Jewish Supervisees”:

It is widely accepted that different ethnic groups have distinctive and meaningful patterns of conversational style that are known—almost intuitively—to their members. Jews are no exception. The patterns of conversation that are found among most Jews, especially those of Eastern European origin, differ in significant ways from patterns of conversation found among most non-Jews in America. (Taylor and Zucker, 9–10)

In her article “Supporting Your Muslim Students: A Guide for Clinical Pastoral Supervisors,” Rabia Terri Harris shares a similar perspective about the importance of religious and cultural diversity guidelines for effective supervision of Muslim CPE students. (Harris, 327–37)

White Christian normativity is the underlying prevalent cultural framework for nearly every spiritual direction and CPE training program. The community of spiritual directors is welcoming more people from diverse spiritual, racial, and cultural traditions. Consequently, there is a growing need for new resources to respond to these...
Changes, especially for ongoing supervision and support.

Supervision is a client-centered, covenanted relationship that empowers the supervisee’s spiritual and vocational life by exploring the **interior movements** that arise while companioning others. Different faith traditions use their own terminology to describe the personal (internal) experience of God. In Judaism, the word *Shechinah* refers to the in-dwelling of God, as well as the Divine Feminine. At its best, supervision provides the freedom and trust to listen to the *felt* sense of knowing, what Quaker educator and mentor Parker Palmer calls the “inner teacher” (Palmer, 25–26).

Whether ordained clergy, layperson, or activist, every spiritual director is like a musical instrument, requiring ongoing tuning, cleaning, and practice. For this reason, there is collective understanding that as long as they are serving others, all spiritual directors will work with a spiritual guide (in this article, I use the terms *spiritual direction, spiritual companioning,* and *spiritual guidance,* as well as *directee* and *client,* interchangeably) and receive supervision.

In the traditional contemplative model of spiritual direction supervision, the director dives into his own inner spiritual life by exploring the content of the session in a manner akin to psycho-spiritual countertransference, to borrow a phrase from psychoanalysis. In her book *Looking into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors,* Maureen Conroy writes:

*Because spiritual directors are intimately involved with others’ life and religious experience, they need others to accompany them as they help and support their directees. Since they experience various interior movements while directing, they need the caring presence of another person to explore these movements.* (Conroy, 3)

Supervision is a relationship in which the spiritual director can explore her calling, ministry, and identity, as well as practical issues regarding her work with clients and directees. Particularly given the growing entrepreneurial spirit among contemporary spiritual guides, such topics might include fees, marketing, boundaries, the use of creative expression, and other practices.

One of the felt tensions in spiritual direction is the issue of ministry versus professionalism, particularly with regard to fees and money. There is a historical theological bias operating in spiritual
direction’s Catholic roots that may not resonate with all spiritual companions. In other faith traditions, teachings and practices such as the Buddhist value of right livelihood and the Jewish value of parnossah (“financial sustenance”) offer a different perspective on the financial and business aspects of spiritual direction.

Spiritual directors who embrace both the calling and the professionalism seek supervision that supports them in creating a sustainable practice. Spiritual guides are creating websites and other digital platforms for their work. This is true not only of solo practitioners who create a private practice model; spiritual companions who work within congregations, schools, and organizations are also requesting mentoring and support regarding outreach, marketing, and business development. A contemporary approach to supervision can hold this tension skillfully in both theory and practice.

Spiritual directors (and other practitioners) need the freedom and safety in supervision to discuss their vulnerabilities and successes, mistakes and gifts, and to grow personally and professionally from open disclosure. Supervision serves the spiritual formation of the spiritual director, directee and supervisor.

As directors, we want to be fully who we are when we are working with directees, without being derailed by our own wounds, anxieties or worries. Supervision is how we conquer those blocks. And it is the best continuing education we can receive. (Blythe)

Supervision can occur in a variety of different modalities, such as individual or group (either peer-led or with a facilitator). With the assistance of contemporary technological advances, supervision also takes place online or by telephone. Such technology has become invaluable for spiritual directors who live in geographic areas without available supervisors. Like individual supervision, effective group supervision of spiritual directors takes into account not only dynamics of gender, race, and sexual orientation, but also other aspects of power and privilege that are present in groups.

A Brief Review of Spiritual Direction Supervision Literature

There is scant literature available about spiritual direction supervision. To date, fewer than twenty professional articles and only five books are available on the topic (see Benefiel; Bumpus and Langer; Conroy; Tomaszewski; and Tucker).
Nearly all of the existing publications on spiritual direction supervision reflect implicit and explicit Christian normative bias that is readily apparent in the theology, vernacular, and didactic content. There has been insufficient exploration of supervision with regard to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of identity, power, and privilege.

For a number of years, Spiritual Directors International’s (SDI) quarterly journal, Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction, featured regular articles on supervision in a section entitled “Training, Mentoring and Supervision.” The very first issue published in January 1995 featured an article by Janet Ruffing entitled “Encountering Love Mysticism,” in which she discussed how love mysticism, particularly erotic love and desire in relationship to God, is a topic worthy of exploration in supervision, but one that often stirs up anxiety for supervisors (Ruffing, 20–33).

James Keegan’s book chapter in Sacred Is the Call: Formation and Transformation in Spiritual Direction Programs explores some of the issues and dynamics among supervisory staff in a spiritual direction formation program:

At some point any trained spiritual director, including ourselves, will have to question the basic principles of his or her training, experiment with them and integrate what is of substance into a personal, distinctive style of doing spiritual direction. (Keegan, 140)

Existing articles cover a wide range of topics, including the use of the enneagram in supervision (Huff-Fletcher); a contemplative approach to supervision (Castley; McDonnell); supervision as formation (Creed); and peer supervision (Jorgensen), to name a few.

The goal of supervision is to support the supervisee in sifting, praying, and reflecting in order to cultivate their own unique approach, not to mold people into robotic, cloned versions of their mentors or peers. Supervisors need to be mindful of their own impulses in this regard and to support the supervisee’s authenticity. Community practice guidelines are not meant to create a culture of rigidity or hyperconformity. Rather, they are meant to serve as guiding principles for ministry and practice.

**Ethical Foundation of Supervision**

SDI’s “Guidelines for Ethical Conduct” emphasize the importance of covenant, dignity, and confidentiality and include a statement explicitly “respecting all persons regardless of race, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin, marital status, political belief, mental or physical handicap, any preference, personal characteristic, condition or status” (Palmer, 6). These same ethical principles apply to the supervisory relationship.

In 2018, SDI developed several key documents to serve as cornerstones for spiritual directors. These documents included “Five Principles of Spiritual Direction Training Programs” and “Portrait of a Spiritual Director,” and they were published in Presence along with a new “Curriculum to Accompany the Guidelines for Ethical Conduct.” The five principles are core traditions and orientations, discernment, psychological-social-cultural dimensions, practicum/internship, and supervision (“Five Principles”). As one of the five core principles of spiritual direction training, supervision is “an opportunity to discern a call to suitability for spiritual direction” as well as “an essential element [post-training] to assure the quality of spiritual direction..."
or companionship.... Those who supervise in training programs [and I would add outside of training programs] are themselves in regular supervision” (“Five Principles,” 38).

As Maria Tattu Bowen wrote in her article about boundaries and supervision in spiritual direction,

*Amidst spiritual direction’s regenerative chaos, creating and maintaining clear professional boundaries and receiving regular supervision allows us to negotiate the spiritual direction relationship safely. Underestimating our need for these proactive measures is tantamount to underestimating the powerful processes at work in spiritual direction.*

Boundaries are mentioned several times in the SDI “Guidelines for Ethical Conduct,” and while they are briefly discussed in most spiritual direction, chaplaincy, and psychotherapy training programs, they warrant some further discussion here. I offer the following definition of healthy boundaries within the context of being a soul care practitioner:

*Contact between self and other in which the wholeness and integrity of both are respected—physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.*

To stay faithful to healthy boundaries, there needs to be a strong ethical commitment to accountability, transparency, and ongoing self-supervision. Spiritual direction supervision plays a critical role in relational accountability to self, God, spiritual directees, and a community of soul companions.

Naturally occurring, overlapping relationships are quite common for spiritual directors and supervisors who live in religious communities together, in rural areas, or who are members of the LGBT community, particular faith communities, the disability community, or communities of color. Many people also live at the intersection of multiple identities (e.g., a Buddhist person of color who is also disabled and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer). For a variety of reasons, people with multiple intersecting identities often feel pressure to choose which part of themselves to share and which parts to keep hidden, sometimes for basic physical safety. This compartmentalizing of the self has significant implications for psychological, spiritual, and political well-being, and spiritual direction supervision can offer a refuge for healing as well as greater learning and skill building.

Daeseop Daniel Yi writes about a felt sense of wholeness as one of the generative gifts of spiritual direction supervision. In his article “Final Principle and Lasting Fundamental: Supervision as Pathway to Wholeness,” Yi writes:

*Supervision of spiritual directors consistently helps spiritual directors remember who they are in God and assists them in living out this truth-ful, authentic identity as whole persons in their spiritual direction ministry and in each arena of their life. Therefore, supervision is not just about developing the skills of spiritual directors but about their being whole persons in God who are becoming aware of how their various thoughts, feelings and nonthematic dimensions affect their spiritual direction sessions and their connections with other people, society and nature.*

Often in supervision, both parties want to present their most polished selves, keeping their own growing edges and limitations hidden, perhaps for self-protection or approval from the other.
In truth, all aspects of the self are present in the supervisor relationship, some more visible than others. For supervision to offer a truly welcoming relationship and process for the spiritual companion/supervisee, it is incumbent on supervisors to continue their own learning and growth. Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens describe the need for “a learning environment that supports participants in the challenging work of authentic engagement with regard to issues of identity, oppression, power, and privilege” (Arao and Clemens, 138–39). It is our ethical commitment as spiritual directors and supervisors to bring these issues to prayer and to supervision.

An evolving approach to spiritual direction supervision affirms the fullness of the supervisee’s identity and lived experience that includes people of all genders, races, sexual orientation, abilities, economic backgrounds, and faith traditions. This multifaceted, inclusive framework is particularly meaningful for people who have not found their own reflection mirrored in the traditional images of God, or those who have experienced shame, isolation, or trauma in the context of traditional organized religion.

The growing commitment to diversity in the spiritual direction community can benefit from lessons learned in the health care field. In their groundbreaking 1998 article, Drs. Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García presented the concept of cultural humility as a new framework for engagement that goes beyond skills and competency, emphasizing “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances” (Tervalon and Murray-García, 123). While cultural competency focuses primarily on behaviors, attitudes, skills, and knowledge, cultural humility emphasizes an ongoing personal practice of self-reflection.

The fields of pastoral counseling and chaplaincy offer a number of useful resources from which spiritual direction supervisors can draw for reflection and practice. The direct naming of the power that supervisors possess and the importance of using it responsibly send an important message to pastoral counselors about their ethical responsibility in clinical practice. A recent notable change in the lexicon of spiritual care is the renaming of CPE supervisors as certified educators (see https://www.manula.com/manuals/acpe/acpe-manuals/2016/en/topic/definition-of-terms).

Contemporary feminist and womanist theologies provide useful tools for creating a sacred container for spiritual direction supervision. (It is important to acknowledge that I bring the limitations and biases of white privilege to my reading of womanist theology.) In her article “Social Trauma and Public Spirituality: A Womanist Relational Ethic of Spiritual Practice,” Phillis Isabella Sheppard writes about spiritual direction and spiritual care for healing trauma:

A womanist relational ethic of spiritual care
and guidance has a trajectory that is disruptive of sociocultural ways of being. (Sheppard, 145)

Supervision can be both contemplative and lovingly disruptive in the service of deeper discernment and spiritual formation.

While spiritual direction is not therapy, Natalie Porter highlights the potency of the supervisory relationship as a climate for exploring the many dimensions of the supervisee’s (and directee’s) identity and experience in her article about integrating anti-racist, feminist, and multicultural perspectives in clinical supervision:

Supervision must begin to incorporate an understanding of the analysis of oppression, as well as greater breadth of information about gender and cross-cultural issues. (Porter, 126)

There have been precedents for such radical inquiry in related disciplines. For example, feminist therapist Ricki Boden has specialized in clinical supervision for many years. Her continuing education class on culturally relevant supervision directly addresses the ethical issues in supervision with regard to cultural diversity and the relationship between supervisor and supervisee.

Culture is broadly defined to include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, mental or physical ability, social class, body size and religious identification. The importance of supervisors’ active engagement with cultural material is emphasized. Ethical considerations are addressed by referencing professional codes of ethics and through discussion of boundaries, self-disclosures and power dynamics within supervision. (Boden)

There are too few places and people with whom we can speak about these issues with an open heart without fear of judgment, criticism, or shame. Carol A. Falender’s article about feminist supervision in psychotherapy also informs this ethical framework for spiritual direction supervision:

Recognizing that power cannot be erased entirely, feminist supervision models explicate the impact of such power and relationship on the supervisor process. … That every supervisee brings to supervision substantial strengths and a unique and valued world view, belief structures and knowledge [and I would add, spiritual life] are tenets of feminist supervision. (Falender, 23–24)

The onus rests squarely with the supervisor with regard to continuing self-assessment of cultural competency and humility. Too often those who are targets of oppression end up bearing the burden of educating the privileged. Commitment to such ongoing awareness also underscores the value of peer consultation for supervisors.

**Supervisor as Mentor and Witness**

In his article “Can I Get a Witness? Spiritual Direction with the Marginalized,” Juan Reed
“Respect My Boundaries” — Judy Ko
explores with great skill and compassion the archetype of the witness to describe the spiritual director who serves as a spiritual companion to the marginalized. Reed’s perspective lends itself well to the role of the supervisor as witness to the director’s lived experience; such is the multidimensional sacred unfolding and Divine flow to and through directee, director, and supervisor. (Reed, 93–104)

Psychologist and trauma specialist Peter Levine writes of the spiritual dimension of bearing witness to trauma healing:

In a lifetime of working with traumatized individuals, I have been struck by the intrinsic and wedded relationship between trauma and spirituality. From my earliest experiences with clients suffering from a daunting array of crippling symptoms, I have been privileged to witness profound and authentic transformations. ... This awakening of our life force, transmuted from survival to ecstatic aliveness, is truly the intrinsic gift laid at our feet and waiting to be opened through this journey of sweet surrender to the sensate world within, whether we are survivors of trauma or simply casualties of Western culture. (Levine, 342, 356)

The mentoring aspect of the supervisory relationship requires a foundation of ethical integrity that can support human vulnerability. Lois J. Zachary’s invaluable book The Mentor’s Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships is a rich, compassionate guide for mentors that could serve as a wonderful resource for spiritual direction supervisors, particularly those working in formation and training programs. Zachary speaks to the heart of the supervisor-supervisee relationship:

No one can mentor without connection. In fact, mentoring is most successful when it is done collaboratively.… Facilitating successful mentoring is a reflective practice that takes preparation and dedication. It begins with self learning. (Zachary, xix)

The supervisor-supervisee relationship often matures into more of a collegial mentorship over time. This transformation need not interfere with the supervisory relationship. Formal and informal mentoring have also been particularly important healing and empowering resources in communities that have experienced oppression and discrimination. For example, there are formal mentoring programs for students of color, women, and LGBT students in many universities and in a number of professional organizations.

Phyllis (all case examples use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality), one of my earliest supervisees, was actively engaged in the psycho-spiritual practice of reclaiming her own wholeness. A biracial woman, she had grown up culturally Jewish with a white Jewish father and an African American mother from a Baptist family. She had been a spiritual seeker since childhood, and the vocational calling of spiritual direction grew organically out of her own search for spiritual mentors and guides. As a spiritual director, her ministry was companioning other mixed-race and multifaith young adults.

It was critically important for me to let Phyllis know that all facets of her identity, human dignity, and experience were seen, welcomed, and affirmed. Together we cocreated the supervisory agreement and verbatim forms, and we made an ethical commitment to ongoing open, honest dialogue, particularly about how our differences might arise in our work together.
**Somastics and Trauma-Informed Supervision**

The spiritual direction supervisory relationship can be a unique container for both supervisor and supervisee to heal spiritual wounds that exist on a continuum of experience ranging from disappointments to communal trauma. The kinds of trauma experiences people bring to spiritual direction not only include physical and emotional trauma but also oppression and abuse within religious institutions. The spiritual scars and aftereffects of trauma often result in people feeling they are disposable, unworthy of being loved by God, other people, and themselves. As spiritual directors hold the space for their directees to share their stories of trauma, the need for support in one-on-one or peer supervision becomes even more critical.

Much has also been written in psychological literature about compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization (see Van Dernoot Lipsky; Rothschild). Spiritual challenges in vicarious traumatization can include loss of meaning; hopelessness; dryness in prayer; feeling spiritually bankrupt; disconnection from self, others, and God; existential despair or detachment; and even spiritual numbness. Effective supervision of spiritual directors must include an awareness of these signs of compassion fatigue, as well as familiarity with spiritual and professional resources to support them.

A handful of articles have been written about working with trauma survivors in spiritual direction (see Garthwaite and Bowers; Sullivan; Arms; Wuellner; Brown; and Richardson), but few articles specifically discuss how to address issues of trauma that may arise in supervision. These issues include exploration of material that the supervisee brings regarding working with trauma survivors in spiritual direction as well as any of the supervisee’s own trauma history that may be triggered.

Be aware that the stories survivors tell may stir up some of your own issues. If you are not already in supervision or a supervision group, seek it out. This will be of invaluable support to you as you companion the survivor. … Processing these emotions outside the spiritual direction session by speaking with your supervisor, a fellow spiritual director, or through journaling and contemplation can help you from becoming overwhelmed. Sometimes a ritual of releasing your emotions and lifting your spiritual directees into the keeping of the Divine can remind you of the Source of all comfort, strength and hope. (Magrath, 26)

Henri Nouwen’s writings about the archetype of the wounded healer provide valuable insight and guidance for supervisors navigating the waters of trauma.

Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind? In short: “Who can take away suffering without entering it?” (Nouwen, 72)

The archetype of wounded healer further underscores the need for effective, meaningful supervision to ensure that old wounds don’t interfere with the capacity to be present with the other. While supervision is not a substitute for therapy, supervisors need to be informed and prepared for working with trauma issues, including sensitivity to the boundaries of supervision and when to refer to psychotherapy or
clinical consultation. Many spiritual directors and supervisors consult with a clinician about psychological issues as needed.

In their article “Dancing, Moving and Writing in Clinical Supervision? Employing Embodied Practices in Psychotherapy Supervision,” authors Panhoefer, Payne, Meekums and Parke propose an embodied, expressive arts model of self-supervision that has implications and applications for spiritual direction.

Verbal clinical supervision generally does not pay attention to the “whole self” of the therapist. Drawing solely on verbal techniques, it leaves out the bodily experience and the knowledge that inhabits “behind the scene.” (Panhoefer et al., 9–16)

This same critique can be applied to spiritual direction supervision, which has relied almost exclusively on a dialogic approach.

One of the supervision models taught by Mercy Center involved using the verbatim as a script and reenacting the dialogue from the session, with the supervisee in the role of client and the supervisor as spiritual director. This format allows the supervisee to connect more deeply to the spiritual directee’s experience, to notice their own internal response, and to attend to the movement of God within them.

By including the somatic dimension in this supervision model, the supervisee may be able to access more of the unconscious content that is held in the spiritual directee’s body by reenacting their physical stance, including posture, breathing, tone and volume of voice, style of communication, gestures, language for God, prayer practice, and more. Staying with this somatic practice for a few minutes, including some moments of silence, can be a powerful practice that informs the supervisee’s ministry as well as their own spiritual life. This tool is not meant to mimic the spiritual directee but rather to bring the supervisee into greater attunement with God, themselves, and the directee.

Supervisors have a unique opportunity to offer a healing space in which both the supervisor and supervisee can prayerfully attend to the hidden graces of embodied wisdom. Intense emotions, sensations, and memories are held in the unconscious, particularly in the somatic unconscious, of both supervisee and supervisor. Supervisors need to be aware of the landmines of trauma within themselves and their supervisees, and to be sensitive to the possibility of these issues becoming activated.

Several years ago, I was leading an ongoing supervision group of eight women who had developed a strong bond of trust and safety over time. Linda was presenting about a spiritual direction session she had had with a particularly challenging directee. As she spoke, her hands moved up to her chest and she began to have difficulty breathing. With Linda’s permission, the group created a circle around her and invited her to stand in the center. She closed her eyes voluntarily as several group members lay hands on her. A few people did not make physical contact but stood in prayerful silent presence.

As the group leader, I also attended to the reactions and feelings of the other students, while inviting the Divine Presence to be palpably present in the circle. Linda told the story of her lifelong respiratory difficulties. The group listened, staying present and patient with her, and ultimately we observed and felt her literally breathe more deeply and release some of the tension she’d been holding. Simply reporting on a brief seg-
ment of her session with a spiritual directee, Linda was able to discern which aspects of her reaction to the directee were her own interior stirrings and which ones were actually related to the client.

At times I even notice my own ambivalence about the term supervision. I am curious about alternative language, such as coaching or mentoring, or even crafting some new terminology. In feminist clinical supervision, the term covision has been used as an alternative name.

Feminist supervision, or “covision” as it was renamed by Porter and Vasquez (1997, p. 155), is defined as “collaboration, mutuality, disagreement without disapproval, safety, regard for each person and her ideas, the ability to integrate many different perspectives, as well as the ability to encompass both relationship and challenge.” (Falender, 24)

One seasoned spiritual direction supervisor described the cosupervision model she and a colleague have used together for many years. They meet monthly and take turns in the role of supervisor and supervisee with one another.

Trauma-informed supervision could also include expressive arts interwoven with somatic spiritual practices. Elyssa Wortzman has created a process of “Mindful, Art-Based Jewish Spiritual Direction” (MABJSD) that she describes as a “multimodality ritual process of opening, setting boundaries, intention, artmaking and witnessing” (Wortzman, 51–52). In supervision, this process could assist in unearthing some of the supervisee’s unconscious thoughts, feelings, and stirrings for exploration. Contemporary spiritual direction supervision could include somatics, movement, expressive arts, writing, mindfulness practices, and other modalities to fortify the trustworthy foundation of contemplative listening and dialogue.

Multidisciplinary consultation or supervision groups could provide ongoing collaborative learning for supervisors from somatic healing paradigms and those from spiritual direction. An integrative model of spiritual direction supervision utilizes a mind-body-spirit model of attunement that recognizes and reclaims creativity and the body as sources of deep knowing and transformation.

The MESH Model of Supervision

The model outlined is a simple acronym that highlights the essential qualities of a dynamic, multidisciplinary approach to supervision with
clearly articulated ethics, a strong social justice perspective, and relevant psychospiritual and somatic concepts and tools, particularly for trauma-sensitive mentorship. The acronym MESH provides a concise, trustworthy framework for supervisors, spiritual companions, and their ongoing formation and training:

M: Mentoring, Multicultural, Multifaith
E: Empowering, Ethical, Empathic, Expressive Arts
S: Somatic, Social Justice
H: Healing, Holy

The image of MESH evokes a spaciously connected web, which offers a useful visual analogy for supervision. This simple analogy is a reminder not only of the supervisor’s empathic encouragement but also the ultimate safety net of God’s presence.

Ritual can be a valuable resource in supervision, particularly one based on the MESH model. One example of such a ritual to support a supervisee in crafting a vision and intention for their practice of spiritual direction could be to fill a large basket filled with mesh of all kinds: loosely woven fabrics, scarves, swatches of mesh, fishing nets, and other samples. The supervisee is invited to sit with the basket for a few moments, perhaps in silence or with quiet music, chanting or drumming. Then the supervisee places their hands in the basket and chooses a piece of mesh, allowing the physical sensation of touch and the internal felt sense of divinity to guide them.

Upon choosing (or being chosen by) a mesh sample, the supervisee returns to prayerful silence, perhaps followed by some journaling, drawing, or other expressive arts to further explore their identity, intention, hopes, and visions for their spiritual direction practice. In group supervision, group members might collectively create a prayer or blessing over the mesh. The mesh sample then becomes a sacred object that they can take home with them and can serve as a talisman, icon, or amulet for their own use.

Transforming the Culture and Practice of Supervision

In 2014, SDI formed a task force to explore ways to improve the information available about supervision of spiritual directors. Currently the SDI website includes a page on supervision and peer group resources with a reading list of books and articles. While there
are over two hundred known spiritual direction training programs, according to SDI, there is only a handful (actual number not known) of supervision training programs for spiritual directors around the world. Some are theologically based (i.e., within a single faith community), while others are explicitly interfaith and prepare supervisors to work with supervisees from a variety of spiritual traditions.

Emerging new developments and ministries in spiritual direction call for new paradigms that honor and support diverse voices and perspectives. Spiritual directors stand together at a fertile juncture to refresh and deepen the curriculum standards, content, and learning format for supervision training. This revitalization can more effectively prepare trainees for ministry, particularly given the creative changes taking place in spiritual direction.

**Contemplative Ethical Spiritual Practices**

In addition to the psychological and pastoral care resources that help supervisors hone our vocational craft, there are also ethical practices from a variety of faith traditions that support inner work. For instance, many spiritual direction formation and training programs include the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises as part of the core curriculum, including a few supervision training programs in and outside of the United States.

An example from Judaism that supports supervision is Mussar, a framework of ethical principles and spiritual practices based on the teachings of Rabbi Israel Salanter from Lithuania in the 1800s. Mussar practice focuses on middot (soul traits or soul qualities) such as humility, generosity, equanimity, and trust, to name a few, and usually includes meditation, journaling, study of sacred text, movement, and chanting with a learning partner in a spiritual community.

Many other spiritual traditions also have longstanding ethical practices, such as the Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts in Buddhism, working with the nafs (levels of soul) and opening the heart practices in Sufism (Frager), the five-step spiritual mind treatment in New Thought and Religious Science, the yamas and niyamas in yoga (Blashki), the Wiccan Rede (Harrow, 212), and others. The diverse breadth and depth of ethical resources are far beyond the scope of this article but are extremely worthwhile for ongoing learning, exploration, and practice.
Greater Opportunities for Collaboration, Cross-Professional Education, and Collegial Support

Given the mutual commitment to spiritual care shared by spiritual directors, chaplains, and pastoral counselors, building intentional partnerships together and integrative peer supervision groups is long overdue. Supervisors may also find it fruitful to engage with supervisors and mentors in the coaching profession, especially life coaches, integral coaches, and spiritual coaches. The emergence of coaching over the last fifty years has impacted the landscape of mentoring and spiritual care. Hopefully, supervisory chaplains, spiritual directors, and coaches can begin sharing their experiences, theories, skills, and practices for mutual support and growth.

Gather Data about Supervision

In 2010, the SDI Leadership Institute planning committee conducted a survey about supervision, and it yielded useful data from several hundred spiritual directors about their experience and interests. The results of this survey revealed a wide range of differences in the practice of supervision, as well as a strong desire for more training and support. Ongoing research on a regular basis would be helpful to assess supervision training programs’ effectiveness in preparing participants for the ministry of supervision, and to identify topics and needs for ongoing professional development.

Utilize Peer-Learning Pairs and Support Dyads

There are a number of additional peer supervision models that can complement working with a traditional supervisor or mentor. Peer learning dyads, or chevruta in Hebrew, are a wonderful learning practice from Judaism that can foster transformative relationships, learning, and activism. The Hebrew word chevruta comes from the same grammatical root as chaver, or friend. Chevruta is a core component of every Jewish spiritual direction formation program. (There are three Jewish spiritual direction training programs in North America: Morei Derekh, Hashpa‘ah, and the Ottawa Center for Spiritual Direction.)

Nurture Transformative Leadership

Effective leadership is expressed in many different voices, actions, and styles, and supervision training programs can cultivate transformative leadership in a variety of ways. For instance, a
Diversity/Cultural Humility Initiative (similar to SDI’s New Contemplatives Initiative) could be established with a mentoring program to support supervision leadership opportunities for spiritual directors of color and other underrepresented people in the spiritual direction community.

A new contemporary model of supervision for spiritual directors needs to be supple, open, and responsive to ongoing growth and exploration. We need many more opportunities, venues, and formats for open-source sharing of ideas, resources, and practices. Supervisors are encouraged to discern God’s call for greater innovation and creativity while honoring the many traditions that have informed this mentoring ministry.

As part of my own ongoing discernment process, I ask myself, “What does it feel like to be of service as a supervisor?” Some of the descriptors that come to mind include irreverent, curious, nurturing, humbling, engaging, inspiring, challenging, brave, and energizing. Supervision is a practice of love mysticism, to borrow Janet Ruffing’s phrase. There is a deep well of love that nourishes the supervisory relationship, and it is a profound gift to walk the vocational path together with laughter, joy, and humor alongside grief and vulnerability. When supervisees are willing to risk being fully seen and held, both are transformed by the experience.

References


In Praise of Doubt

When I was certain,
I had no time
for non-believers.

With nothing else
to make me special,
being chosen
was my claim to fame.

When Billy Hogle said
Jesus wasn’t born in December
I pounded his lip
till his blood runneth over.

A priest once said:
It takes the same training
to make a Francis of Assisi
as it takes to make a terrorist.

When I was certain,
this seemed a lie.

Now that I dwell in
the mansions of Mystery,
I see its truth,
I feel its blade.

Jan Phillips