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An Interview with Genjo Marinello Roshi

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Portrait of a Spiritual Director: An Interview with Genjo Marinello Roshi Anil Singh-Molares

Presence: For the benefit of our readers, tell us a little bit about your background. I know you are a psychotherapist, a spiritual director, and a Zen teacher. How do all of those elements combine together?

Genjo Marinello Roshi: I started my Zen practice in 1975, got ordained in 1980, and trained in Japan briefly from the fall of 1981 to February of 1982, so I had one training season there. I continued my training thereafter for more than twenty years with my ordination teacher here in Seattle, and then I had a kind of finishing school with Eido Shimano Roshi.

During the course of those years, I became a leader of the local Zen community but realized that I was ill-prepared to handle some of the questions that were coming to me as a priest about the spiritual journey, psychological issues, and family of origin issues.

In my role as a Zen priest and a leader, I didn't feel that meditation alone prepared me adequately for those kinds of questions. Since I am also a Quaker, I got my Quaker Meeting to sponsor me to attend a two-year spiritual direction program here in Seattle that concluded in 1989. At that time, it was associated with the Vancouver School of Theology up in British Columbia. That program prepared me for the kinds of questions that I was getting about the spiritual journey in a broader context than I was getting just from Zen. For instance, we read a lot about the Christian Mystics, whom I had already been somewhat familiar with, which allowed me to interlace with Zen mysticism and spirituality. And that became part of the program of a section that I later began teaching.

Talk a little about your psychotherapy background. Did that come later?

Yes, that came a little bit later. Even after spiritual direction, I didn't feel as though I'd had enough depth either about myself personally or about other people's problems, conundrums, complications, and confusions. So I went on to graduate school in psychology; which complemented the undergraduate degree in psychobiology from UCLA I already had, and I completed that two-year master's program in 1991.

I did the spiritual direction and psychology programs back-to-back, so there were about four years of training.

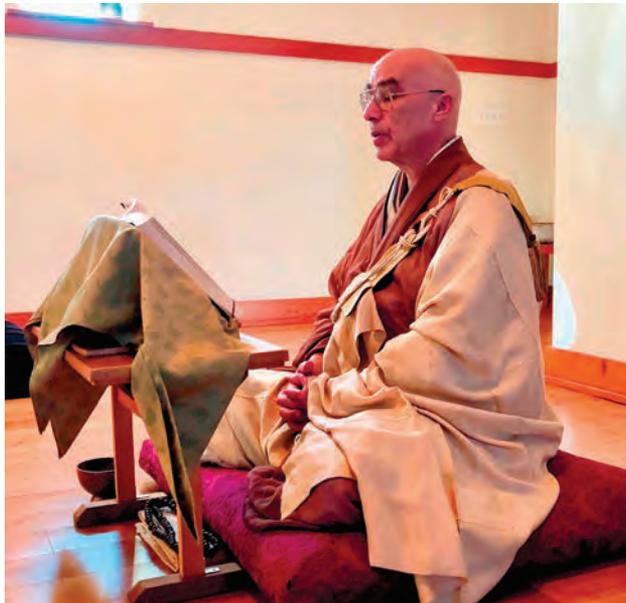
And did that cover the bases? Was there anything missing?

No, I wasn't done, as I discovered when I actively began seeing people one on one, as well as couples. And as often is said by many teachers, one's students are the best teachers.

The students and clients are going to ask the questions and present the dilemmas that you are going to cut your teeth on. So, yes, four years of training was very helpful, but it was only the beginning of what I learned from seeing clients and spiritual directees, as well as from peers, peer groups and mentoring.

Help us understand a little bit about the kinds of questions you're talking about. For instance, Zen deals with these huge metaphysical questions: Who am I? What's my role? What's going to happen to me after I die? And...

And "what is this?"





Yes, “what is this?” What propelled you from your training with handling these deep metaphysical issues to say, “I need a little more in this area”? What kinds of questions were you feeling unable to answer without the additional spiritual direction formation, and then the psychological training?

Well, you know, the only answer in Zen is more sitting. That’s the only answer. So in a way, the role of the priest is really easy: let’s have some tea, and then you sit. That’s the extent of spiritual guidance in Zen: more practice. And I could see that helped many people, but not everybody.

Some people are a little more gnarly—myself included. I think that while meditation and spiritual practice create the foundation, and the spaciousness of heart and mind, for deeper work and a wider perspective, they don’t actually do that work, which has to be done psychologically by each individual.

There’s a difference between Enlightenment and maturity. Enlightenment is a broadening, a perspective, and a breaking down of one’s narrow egoistic perspective, and that isn’t all that hard to come by. There are lots of ways to get to that, but by itself it doesn’t create maturity; although it does engender a spaciousness in which maturity and growth can more easily happen, where you have the groundedness and spaciousness to look at, delve into, and process things that are sticky.

One of my recent ancestors in the Zen lineage, whom I never met, was very prominent at Ryatakuji. He was the abbot of that temple two generations before I was there, my dharma great-grandfather in a way. And he said Zen is not about enlightenment; Zen is about burning off or combusting the generational madness or crap that we hang on to, even when we don’t realize it. The cushion that we sit on when we meditate is the place to exhaust or combust this inner sticky material, and that’s what Zen is really about. Enlightenment is easy. As Hakuin said, enlightenment is as easy as picking up a piece of dust from the floor. It does take a little punching through one’s narrow egoistic cage of a perspective, but once that’s done, then the real work begins.

We say that a breakthrough into your deep nature is just the beginning of integration, processing, and maturing.

So would you say these are the tools that your spiritual direction and psychology training gave you: essential tools for going beyond enlightenment to maturity?

Yes. And with spiritual direction in particular, I’m looking for how directees are connected to something in their lives—a creative process, a relationship process, a connection to Nature with a capital *N*, a connection to God or a Higher Power as one might understand it, or at least a reality beyond their own narrow egoistic perspectives. What are they doing in terms of practice that will help them commune with something bigger than themselves—their own narrow egoistic selves? So that’s what I see spiritual direction doing, and there are many ways beside Zen meditation that you can get at that.

As a spiritual director, I’m asking questions such as “Where do you feel most creative?” to which I might get a response like, “I feel the most creative when I’m cooking.” I might then say: “When was the last time you cooked a good meal?” Or a response might be, “I feel most creative when I’m playing the guitar,” to which I might respond, “Well, when was the last time you picked up a guitar?” If somebody then says, “Well, years ago,” I might start scratching my head immediately and say, “Well you might want to pick up the guitar again.”

I like to find out where people feel connected, and in communion, and then boost that. And, of course, That can come from selective reading, chanting, listening or playing music—there are all kinds of ways—and then creating some kind of structure or modality to help individuals connect to something beyond themselves. And that’s the spiritual direction side of it.

On the psychological side, it’s about creating some spaciousness and groundedness to expose sticky wickets, places where you’re stuck, where you don’t feel like you’re moving forward, or where you have some arrested development, trauma or abandonment in the past, or some complication of today, or even tomorrow, that is getting in your way. You feel stuck and are either depressed or anxious about it, and you ask, “Now what do I do?” Meditation alone is not enough. So now what? And so then the psychological toolbox comes in handy in exploring what it is that is keeping a person stuck. Is it something from the past that’s living in the present? Is



it some fear about the future? Is it some complication today? Those are actually the easiest questions. But if there are fears about the future or some complication in the past that's kept something stuck for a long time, that's like trying to untangle a knot. It takes time.

So, you got your spiritual direction training almost three decades ago. Looking back over those almost thirty years as a spiritual director, what do you think was the most useful tool to you in helping others break through to those questions that spiritual direction addresses?

You know, the most important tool in some ways in psychology and in spiritual direction is listening. You can always just ask, "Please say more."

Is that all?

So often our inner material is not well heard, or we are stuck in some kind of narrative. If we were really heard, we might be able to move on, or see around the corner, or see something old in a new way. And it involves a lot of listening, deep listening.

The change agent in spiritual direction, and in psychotherapy too, is the same. When you have established a listening relationship where the other person feels heard, and seen, and they can trust that they're not going to be judged or condemned for who they are or what they have been through, then that's a gigantic change factor. Some of the best skills that I learned in spiritual direction were "don't fix things, just listen." People know how to get out of their own trouble, or find their own way, if they have someplace where they can be grounded and feel heard.

Most everyone, nearly, can find their own way. We are built to grow—that's a natural thing. But if you've got something preventing your own growth, a lot of times just having someone who can hear it and see it with you is one of the biggest change factors.

Would you say there is such a thing as Buddhist spiritual direction?

Not particularly. I participate very deeply in a Christian context as a Quaker, and the same is true in the Buddhist context, but I don't particularly think of

myself as either Buddhist or Christian. I find that the Quaker way of meeting the world or spirituality speaks to me, so I make use of it. I find that the Buddhist way of exploring and inquiring speaks to me, so I make use of it too. I certainly appreciate that both of these great traditions, amongst others, speak of the Golden Rule, or something like it, so they have good guidelines, queries or koans that help frame and direct the practice, the worship, the service and the compassion that comes from those. I appreciate that from both big schools. But I try to be neither a Buddhist nor a Christian in my spiritual direction. I'm interested in someone's communion with something beyond themselves, however they might define or experience that.

Whether they call that Buddha Nature, or Dharma, or Inner Light, or Godhead, I don't care. To me, the great religions all draw from the same water table and reach towards the same light. They may be trees of very different species, in very different territories, but they all reach for the same light in the same water table. So for me, I'm reaching personally for the same light in the same water everybody else is, and I make use of the roots of different trees to get there and different branches to get to the light.

A little bit earlier you noted that one of the key skills you acquired from both your psychology training and your spiritual direction training is deep listening. And obviously as a Zen practitioner, there's a lot of deep listening as well, of a different sort. Considering the hundreds of clients and students that you have tended to, ministered to, or been associated with, over the years, what's been the impact on you? What impact has this two-way dialogue that you have with a lot of your clients and students had on you?

It keeps me sane. People sometimes ask me, "You've gotten very busy as a Zen abbot, why don't you just kind of cut back on your spiritual direction and psychotherapy practices?" No, no, no. It keeps me honest, but more importantly it keeps me sane. By constantly seeing other people's places where they get stuck, or hindered, or encumbered, and helping them



“Bright Wings” — Mary Southard

work through those, it helps me work through my own stuff as well. It keeps me clear, as I listen to things that come out of my mouth, and I kind of walk my own talk. That keeps me honest and keeps me inquiring and exploring. It allows me to work on my own maturity and my own growth, which is never ending. You wouldn't want to “arrive.” You want to always be able to say, “I am just beginning.” So the number of students, clients, and patients that I have had do that. And I am very, very grateful. I certainly charge a fee for spiritual direction and psychotherapy, but I'm getting as much out of it regardless of the fee. And once we're in a trustful relationship, I'll never have money be a hindrance. Let's

just keep going, it's too rich, for both parties.

You have a unique perspective with a foot in both camps, as a psychotherapist and as a spiritual director. One of the challenges that spiritual direction as a profession is facing is that distinction: where is that line? Where is it a mental health issue, when someone is suicidal, or pathological in some way, and you go, “This exceeds my toolbox or my responsibilities as a spiritual director,” and it starts to veer into a mental health category, which is the domain of psychology or



psychiatry. Do you see that dividing line? Do you agree with it?

I have a cadre of people I refer to: people who teach Yoga or Aikido, or people who teach Qigong. A particular client may need a massage therapist, or a Qigong master, or an acupuncturist, or an osteopath, or a psychiatrist, more than they need me. So I know when to refer to someone else and say, “We need a bigger team of people here.” I don’t have expertise as a Yoga instructor, Qigong master, acupuncturist, or psychiatrist, so I am constantly making referrals. I can see when somebody fits a different category.

I think every spiritual director needs a list of modalities that can complement our work with people. Because it’s not a “one stop fits all” kind of thing. As spiritual directors, we offer a certain niche, a certain slice of how to relate to something bigger than yourself. That’s our slice.

And as a psychotherapist, I offer certain tools, which are pretty similar to spiritual direction, on how to untangle things that are stuck. But if they are really stuck in a way that I can’t get at, then I’m going to refer them to a psychiatrist who might be able to provide some meds that would help stabilize things, or get things moving where I couldn’t by myself, as they may have the background in the severity of the problems that I’m facing with a client that is beyond my skill set. So I know when things are beyond my skillset and I need to refer to as someone else. As a spiritual director, we need to know: Where is this not in my modality? Where do I feel like I’m a little bit at my wits end, and need to refer? And I think everybody has that problem. It doesn’t matter what skill set you’re starting with. You’ve only got one niche.

And humans are the most complicated creature in a whole quadrant of the galaxy. I’m convinced of that. It may not take a village, but it does take a team to help with our maturity. It’s not like we are not built for natural growth and unfolding. But we are so complex, and that is easy to forget. We must have different modalities to touch on to help move things along.

And I’m guessing that you learned this the hard way?

Yes. I know for myself that it’s not just one thing. I have my own analyst, osteopath, acupuncturist, primary care physician, and so forth on call. I don’t solve all of

my own problems, let alone somebody else’s, without a team. I go to a lot of people personally. So why wouldn’t I send someone else to a lot of people? It is also true, however, as I learned both in spiritual direction and in psychotherapy, that you should allow yourself to be challenged. If you feel like you are on your own growing edge, that’s a good thing.

That’s not immediately the time to refer. You should get consultation at that point. You should be talking to a mentor, a supervisor, or a peer group. If you’re at your growing edge and feel like “whoa, this is just barely within my capacity,” that’s actually perfect for you as a spiritual director. You just have to consult at that point. On the other hand, if it’s just way over the cliff from your skill set or in a different modality, then it’s time to refer.

Let’s talk a little about spiritual direction as a profession. Spiritual Directors International (SDI) has about 6,600 spiritual directors around the world, which is a small subset of the people offering these types of services. What would you say are some of the main challenges that spiritual direction as a profession is facing today?

I think there are many programs out there that offer courses, certificates, or degrees in spiritual direction. And I do think that having gone through course work with peer group, consultations, and practice sessions and the like were very helpful. That’s not to say that there aren’t people who are natural spiritual directors, or who have deep spiritual practice and training, and some tradition, that give them not only the talent but also the experience to offer spiritual direction. Still, I look back at my original two-year program and think that it was really helpful.

It exposed me to certain literature, styles, and skill sets that I would not have bumped into had I had even more deep training in Zen or Quakerism by themselves. So I believe going through some kind of program is helpful in terms of the profession, but it’s not absolutely necessary. I certainly think that people can have apprenticed, received a particular discipline or religious upbringing, or just possess maturity that’s comparable to what they would have gotten from a certificate program or a graduate degree. Some kind of standardization, or authenticity, is important, but I don’t know exactly how to measure that.



And I do think there are people who are natural at it.

To some extent, we are both products of the West, where there are degrees of various kinds, clinical training, supervisors, and so on. What happens when you don't fit that particular mold? How would you identify that authenticity you just mentioned? It's an interesting challenge as we're trying to grow this public square of spiritual direction to be more encompassing than the Western trained. What kinds of things would you look for to determine whether someone really speaks the language of helpfulness or listening? What would that look like? What would you look for?

I think I would know it when I see it, but I don't know exactly how to put it into words. I do know that outwardly I'd be looking for things like: has there been a mentoring relationship? Is there a supervisory relationship? Is there a peer relationship?

Or does the person stand totally on their own? The latter would worry me, if that's where they are, or if that's where their practice or training is from. And I would add to the list: has there been some sort of formal training in listening and coaching? Or not? Sometimes yes, sometimes no, but those are the kinds of things I would look for.

Do you need to be enlightened to be a good spiritual director?

Actually, I think yes. By enlightened, in this case, I mean you need to have a very sincere intimate communion with something beyond yourself. If you don't know what that is personally, how can you show somebody how to swim in it? If you haven't been in the water, and you don't know how to swim yourself, and although you might be able to talk the mechanics of how to swim, you are really not going to be a good swimming teacher. Again, I am talking about the "enlightenment" that comes relatively easily, an intimate, genuine communion with beyond the beyond. One that's relatively steady, not something that has been dried up for thirty years. Something that's alive for the person. Otherwise, if you are in a desert of

sorts yourself, in terms of your own spiritual practice or spiritual communion, it's going to be hard to be an inspiration or a grounding for people who are looking for that kind of water. If you're not feeling it yourself, that's trouble.

Looking to the future from today's perspective, where we are at a difficult juncture in so many places around the world, and potentially in bigger trouble than we were ten or twenty years ago in many ways, can you comment a little bit about the role of spiritual directors moving forward? Where do you see the potential for the greatest growth? And where are we spiritual directors lacking as a community?

You know in terms of where society and culture are at, I think it's our job as spiritual directors to be steady. It's "the tortoise wins the race" kind of thing. We are here to help people not to panic or become so frightened or angry that they become dissociative or dysfunctional.

And so our job collectively is to help be a steady ground, to enable the treatment of these regressions and reactionary kinds of backsliding that we're seeing in our time and culture, in different places in the world. So that we don't see them as just aberrations, but as a pendulum swinging and exposing our own underbelly. And that's a good thing. So that when the pendulum swings back, we will be more mature for having seen our own shadow. Don't panic. And keep going steady. In Zen we say, "Go straight on." Be very, very steady. And sort of plodding. Just go on and focus on the very next thing. As spiritual directors we need to not panic and not be overly frightened or angry. And to show this. That it can be done. That we can be in the midst of very frightened or troubled times and not be consumed by fright or anger. We are teaching the skill set for others to be steady, grounded, and not consumed by fright or anger. So I think that's a big part of our job.

Where do you see the potential for the greatest growth for the spiritual direction community? What are we lacking? What's missing?

Out of almost seven thousand SDI members coming



from different places, I can't say there's something missing. Learning from each other is a great thing. And your particular slant on this, Anil, is very, very exciting.

The traditional world religions have got a lot to offer, but I think looking outside of them for, let's say, aboriginal or indigenous contributions, and cross—religious sharing about what tools have worked in various traditions, to bring people to a broader perspective and a more grounded field, and to learn what's worked in different places is good. That kind of sharing, I think, is what SDI is about lately, and I think it is a very good thing.

Can you say a little more about unity and diversity? Some celebrate multiplicity and diversity as enriching in and of itself, while others say that diversity is just a cover for an essential unity. As a Zen teacher and a spiritual director, what would your comment be about unity and multiplicity?

Both. I always like “E: all of the above.” I think there's room for recognizing more unity and for appreciating more diversity. And that what we really need to learn to do is how to celebrate diversity, while at the same time appreciating an inner unity or sharing of a common reality, things like life and death, and the fabric of this universe. I love doing that.

Celebrating our common interdependence and the fact that we are all part of one fabric of humanity, but even beyond that, the fabric of the universe. So it's one fabric, a multidimensional fabric.

One last question: what do you think of Jesus or Buddha as spiritual directors?

Well, I think spiritual directors invite people to do their own exploration and deep inquiry and invite people to experience a dimension of unity or something beyond themselves. So in that sense, individuals like the historical Jesus or the historical Buddha did a great job inviting inquiry, exploration, and communion with

something bigger than one's narrow egoistic identity. And they have been tremendously successful at that. For instance, as the historical Buddha would say, Here are the tools I have come up with: the Four Noble Truths and meditation, and this is my understanding, I am really excited about it, and it's given me a lot of relief. Maybe it will for you. Why don't you try it? Take what works and leave what doesn't. Let me put some cards on the table. You can try them out and see if they will give you what they have given me, a change in my perspective and my open heartedness.

I'd love to share that with you. Take what works and leave what doesn't. ■

Prayer for a Spiritual Director

Today, I would be a cupped hand of being.
 A piece of pottery, a begging bowl,
 satisfied with what slides or glides or flies in.
 An urn of gratitude, etched with the markings of thanks-
 fortunes and found things and scraps of wind flying in.
 Recognized and read like sacred leaves, scarves,
 holy notes, feathers from above and from within.
 A shrine at the side of the road,
 a halo of sun around my head,
 a thumbprint of God pressed into my side,
 the universe painted on my face,
 a secret keeper inside my womb,
 holding that very wide and deep and open bowl
 of Being.
 A candle lit from within.

May a passerby looking inside see loveliness, a lively kind,
 and holding an open bowl next to mine,
 receive a spark to tender them

through the night. ■

Gina Marie Mammano



spiritual directors international

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In this issue

“**I**n spiritual direction, I’m looking for how the directee is connected to something in his life—a creative process, a relationship process, a connection to Nature with a capital *N*, a connection to God as one might understand it, or a Higher Power as one might understand it. What are you doing in terms of practice that will help you commune with something bigger than yourself—your narrow egoistic self?” (p. 6)

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