



BOOK CLUB

Introduction and Reading Schedule

Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction

By Margaret Guenther

Renovaré Book Club exploration facilitated by Carolyn Arends

INTRODUCTION:

Why a book about spiritual direction?

Several years ago I had the privilege of taking a Regent College course taught by Eugene Peterson, entitled “Tell it Slant: Parables as Spiritual Direction.” I wasn’t entirely sure what “spiritual direction” was, but I figured if Peterson thought spiritual direction was the thing Jesus was doing with his parables, I wanted to know more about it.

Among several books assigned for the course were two Margaret Guenther titles, *The Practice of Prayer* and *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*. I had never heard of Guenther before, but her books quickly became dear companions—full of warm, wise, practical insights on soul care and the practice of the presence of God.

In Peterson’s course I discovered that spiritual direction is, more than anything else, living with an attentiveness to the way God is already speaking into our own lives and the lives of people around us. People, books, words, and events within ordinary experience can all become “spiritual directors” for us, and, often when God uses us a spiritual director for someone else, we are not even aware that it is happening.

Still, it is not unusual for few people within a faith community to have a more obvious gifting for the ministry of spiritual direction, and they sometimes become formally trained and recognized as Spiritual Directors. Margaret Guenther is one such person. In *Holy Listening*, she is able to write “from the field” in a way that sheds light on the formal ministry of spiritual direction, as well as on the day-to-day privileges and pitfalls of ordinary spiritual friendship. If you are interested in either plane of spiritual direction, this book is for you.

Is it only for women?

One of the dominant metaphors Guenther employs for the role of the spiritual director is midwifery, and the final chapter of *Holy Listening* is entitled “Spiritual Direction and Women.” So yes, this book is for women—and for men who know women and might find themselves in spiritual friendships with them. The Scriptures model the use of both masculine and feminine metaphors for God, and we are wise to do likewise in our attempts to understand our lives with God.

That said, I must admit (as a woman), that whenever I read *Holy Listening*, I am struck by how uniquely wonderful it is to hear the contemplative life explored in a feminine voice and context. I am accustomed to reading primarily male authors (or female authors who live in sequestered communities) and subconsciously translating the specific examples given into the language of my own life. I’ve never particularly noticed or been troubled by this process of accommodation, but it is a particular pleasure to hear Guenther grapple with the demands of motherhood, domestic responsibility and professional vocation in such a relatable way. I’ll look forward to hearing how both the women and the men in our Book Club engage with Guenther’s perspective.

What is the plan?

Margaret Guenther is now 87 and living in Washington, DC. While she is officially retired, I think we can safely say, “Once a spiritual director, always a spiritual director.” In a conversation I had with her a few days ago, it was mere minutes before she was speaking into my life. “You’re doing a great job, Kid,” she told me. (Here in my late 40s, I’ll take the name “Kid” any day of the

week.) “it’s clear that you bring a lot of yourself to your work, and that makes your work alive.”

Margaret has agreed to at least one podcast conversation about the book, something I think you’ll be looking forward to once you get to know her in these pages. I will be writing and/or sourcing the rest of our supplementary material, and I am looking forward to some additional recorded conversations with folks working in spiritual direction ministries who also count *Holy Listening* as a treasured companion.

As *Holy Listening* contains only four chapters, we can undergo the reading at a leisurely pace—something we shall see is entirely appropriate for an exploration of spiritual direction (which considers “hurry” particularly toxic to soul care.)

READING SCHEDULE:

- **February 29-March 6:** Read the “Preface” by Allan Jones and Margaret’s Introduction, “Holy Listening”
- **March 7-13:** Reach Chapter One, “Welcoming the Stranger”
- **March 14-20:** Reach Chapter Two, “Good Teachers”
- **March 15-27:** Week off for Easter
- **March 28-April 3:** Reach Chapter Three, “Midwife to the Soul”
- **April 4-April 10:** Read Chapter Four, “Women and Spiritual Direction”
- **April 11-April 17:** Read the “Epilogue” and share concluding thoughts

Discussion questions and supplementary materials will be provided on a weekly basis.

May this book—and our discussion of it—provide a safe and holy space for you to investigate the things God is already speaking into your life. And may we remember, at Margaret’s urging, that “the Holy Spirit is the true director” (p. 39).