**Steve Spilde:** Today it is my great pleasure to welcome Lucy Abbott Tucker. Lucy has been a great contributor to the contemporary practice of Spiritual Direction. She was instrumental in the formation of the organization “Spiritual Directors International.” She has had decades of experience as a spiritual director. She has been a teacher of other Spiritual Directors. She now serves as a teacher of other teachers. We look forward to welcoming her this spring to the Franciscan Spirituality Center, where she will lead a workshop for our supervisors in the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. Welcome, Lucy Abbott Tucker.

**Lucy Abbott Tucker:** Thank you very much, Steve.

**Steve:** Lucy, as we begin, a good place to start, I think, is, what is spiritual direction, in your understanding?

**Lucy:** For many years I described spiritual direction as a conversation between two people who believe in the reality of God, however that is named, where one person is primarily the speaker and the other is primarily the listener. We are trying to touch more clearly the presence and the activity of the sacred in the speaker. I like that definition, and I still use most of it. Several years ago, I listened to a TED Talk by a man named Simon Sinek. He talked about what makes organizations and people great – what helps them to stand out among others. He used three concentric circles, and the innermost circle was ‘why’; the second circle was ‘how’; and the largest circle was ‘what.’ He uses a lot of examples, and I would encourage you to listen to his podcasts. One example he used that always stuck with me was Martin Luther King. He said in the 1960s there were many great people speaking about civil rights. Why did Martin Luther King speak on the steps of the Washington Monument and have thousands of people listening to him? We all know the answer: He had a dream, [which is] his famous speech. But his dream was there are laws of God, and laws of men. Until those come together, we will never have justice and peace. Simon Sinek described that as the ‘why’ of his energy that made him stand out from others.

When I looked at my definition, I realized it didn’t have a ‘why’ in it. Why do I do this work? So now, I use the same words as I started out with, but I begin with, *“Because I believe God is present and active in every moment of life, spiritual direction is a conversation.”* That’s what Spiritual Direction is about for me: Touching that God presence that is always with us.

**Steve:** Thank you, thank you. … How do you spell Simon Sinek? How is his last name spelled?

**Lucy:** S … I … N … E … K. It’s a TED Talk. I can get you the exact title, Steve.

**Steve:** I think if people Google “Simon Sinek” and “TED Talk,” it will come up. Thank you for sharing that resource. It sounds like something I want to watch. … You do a lot of work for the organization called “Spiritual Directors International.” Could you tell us what is SDI? How did it form? How were you involved in that beginning?

**Lucy:** It was I think like 1988 or 1989. There had evolved since the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic Church probably – I’m going to say six to 10 – training programs for spiritual directors within the United States. I can’t say too much outside of the United States, but within the United States. I always say incredibly charismatic, gifted, primarily Jesuit priests using the exercises of Ignatius of Loyola were offering individual retreat experiences throughout various parts of the United States. They soon realized they needed to prepare other people to do this work, particularly at that time to lead the spiritual exercises. The first group of people that flocked to that was Roman Catholic women religious. However, in their wonderful, charismatic, gifted sense, in my opinion, they had one small flaw. They all had a slightly different understanding of spiritual direction and what it could include, and they didn’t talk to one another. That’s how strongly they felt.

In the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, people like me that I call “Second Generation Spiritual Directors” even though we come from an immense line of spiritual directors, but in the modern age, Second Generation Spiritual Directors, I think realized that it was important that we talk to one another, [and] that even with different ways if understanding spiritual direction, we needed the support of one another. Because in 1990 if you said to someone, “I’m a spiritual director,” you got this sort of glazed-over kind of look like, what is that? And so, Sister Mary Ann Scofield, who was a Sister of Mercy from Burlingame, California, was a primary mover in this. What she did and the center she worked in, Mercy Center in Burlingame, wrote to everybody they knew who was doing spiritual direction, to every training program, and they said, “We’re going to have a meeting.” I would say at that first meeting there was probably about 40 of us who got together really for the purpose of supporting one another in the ministry and helping it to grow. We met for one year in Mercy Center Burlingame and had a wonderful, wonderful meeting with one another. We decided to come back for a second meeting a year later, and it was at that second meeting that we decided to form an organization. Because many training programs were not just training people from the United States, but literally from around the world, we took the title “Spiritual Directors International.”

In the next 10 years we formed a board. We got a 501(c)3. We decided to publish a magazine. We hired an editor. We established regional group meetings and a yearly meeting. We did a lot of things in less than 10 years. [We] wrote the guidelines for ethical conduct. I would say the primary goal, even today, of Spiritual Directors International is to unite people who do this ministry, to provide ongoing education and information about it, and to be as supportive as we can of people who are involved in this ministry.

**Steve:** My understanding, then, of how that has evolved [is] so originally it was primarily people who identified as Catholic, but it has evolved into other forms of the Christian tradition [and] other religious traditions [and] people who can see themselves as spiritual but not religious. Can you talk about how that has evolved over time?

**Lucy:** From the very beginning, some of the people who are most attracted to spiritual direction are people who felt their church systems – whatever that church system was – was not really meeting them where they were. You probably know this already, Steve, [but] we call it they were in liminal space. They used to know, it didn’t quite work anymore, they didn’t yet know what was coming, and they were in this space between this darkness. People would hear about this thing called “spiritual direction” and say, “That’s what I need.” That spans every religious tradition, not just Roman Catholic. From very early on, people from all kinds of religious traditions have come and been welcome because Spiritual Directors International never was – and is still not – about a particular faith tradition. It’s about seeking God.

Many, many years ago, I had a Buddhist teacher, and I want to say he was 102. He was this small, erect, but I never understood the word ‘wizened’ until I met him, but [he was] a wizened person, and he spoke very softly and very slowly. He used to begin almost any presentation I ever heard him say by saying – and he would be raising his arm slowly, slowly, slowly – he would be saying, “There are many paths to God in our world. No path is better than another. They are all seeking to be in union with the holy.” That, as you can tell, always stayed with me, and I think that’s what spiritual direction is about: anyone who is seeking that which is beyond us.

**Steve:** Given that your understanding continues to evolve, how has this shaped your understanding as a Catholic? I would guess in some ways it has really deepened your understanding as a Catholic.

**Lucy:** Yes. I think Spiritual Direction has given me the freedom to ask some questions that maybe there’s not a lot of places where there is permission to ask those questions. A very basic question [is], How do I understand Jesus of Nazareth? What I say now is, I think Jesus had a relationship with God that was so transparent that people could not help but be attracted to it. And I think the invitation of Jesus is for me and for us to grow in that same kind of transparency. That’s not usually what I hear in traditional Roman Catholic services. I also say if I had the authority, I guess, to do it, I would take crucifixes out of every Roman Catholic church, and I would replace them with pictures of The Last Supper, because I don’t think Jesus was about dying for my sins. I think Jesus was about creating communion, and I’m not sure we talk about that enough – what does communion really look like? I always say I was born a Roman Catholic – well, I wasn’t born, I was baptized – a Roman Catholic at a very young age. I will be buried out of the Roman Catholic Church. I value it. It’s the tradition of my family. But I’m a different Catholic than I was 25 years ago.

**Steve:** When we talked before, you told this beautiful story of the tradition was given to you really from your family. But as you’ve gone through your life, it’s really become your own faith experience. Can you share a story early in your life where you had a personal experience with God? It was Lucy’s experience [and] not just the family tradition or just the tradition of the community.

**Lucy:** Some of you, if you are good with accents, will notice that I have a New York accent. I don’t think I do, but other people [do]. I grew up in a part of New York called Long Island. My dad was in the Second World War. When he came home from the war, housing was a really difficult issue. On Long Island, which was large swatches of potato farms, they built up housing – one house right after another. [It was] row housing in a sense. That’s where my family moved. There were very few trees in the area where I grew up. But not too far from our home, there was a place that as children we called “The Woods.” Now, I have since seen real woods. This was about four football fields of trees clustered together, but it was a place I used to love to go as a kid. I was there one day walking through the woods, and I’m pretty sure it was in the fall, and I was probably 13 or 14. As I was walking through the woods, I came to a spot where the sun was shining through the trees, and it fell upon me on the path I was walking on. I had the sense that I was simply stopped in my tracks. I just wanted to stand there and let that sun beat down upon me. The experience I had was that I had roots growing out of the bottom of my feet, and those roots connected me to everyone and everything else in this world – even the people in China, which I was sure was on the other side of the world. And that out of the top of my head I had these rays coming up, and these rays connected me with everything that was above me, especially with God. I can remember even as a child standing there and thinking, “This is important. Remember this.”

And I often say, first of all, it’s probably my first conscious sense of communion with God. And secondly, I truly believe I have spent the rest of my life believing that experience and seeking to understand it.

**Steve:** I sense that experience is important to you as a spiritual director, correct?

**Lucy:** Yes.

**Steve:** I’m interested to hear your reaction to this. I’m involved in a training program, and as people apply, we often will tell them our program is not so much about teaching you skills. The actual listening skills we teach we could probably do in a long weekend. But it really is personal formation. It’s creating a space inside of you that you can receive the story of someone else. How would you word what happens to a person during a training program to become a spiritual director?

**Lucy:** I think I’m going to tell a story. I teach a class at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago called “The Spiritual Journey: Desire, Resistance, and Occasionally Stubbornness.” I had a woman from the neighborhood come to see me. She said, “I’m coming because I’m interested in spiritual direction, and I heard you teach this class.” I said, “Great. Let’s talk about that a little bit.” She said, “The first thing you need to know, however, is that I don’t have a spiritual journey. I have a life.” I said, “Oh, OK. Why don’t you tell me about that life?” She told me she’s married and has three children. She and her husband were both fairly recently retired. He has some signs of early Alzheimer’s, but is not yet limited.

She told me about her three children. Her oldest son is married and lives out in California and has two children. She said, “It’s a sadness in my life because I don’t really know those children very well. We call and we get on FaceTime, but they’re kind of at an age where they say, ‘Hi, Grandma’ and just kind of keep on running.” Then she said, “My second daughter lives just around the corner from me, and I help with childcare. She has three girls, and after school three days a week they come and stay with me, and that’s probably the biggest blessing in my life. My youngest child is my son,” and she said, “I call him my ‘lost child.’” She said, “He finds it very hard to finish any task. He’ll say he’s coming for dinner on Sunday and then he doesn’t show up.” She said, “I always, always worry about him.”

When she told me all that, I said to her, “I would wonder if that’s not what your spiritual journey is right now, the way you are with and present to each one of those children and grandchildren, and your husband.” She kind of sat quietly for a little bit, and she said, “OK, but there’s a second problem.” I said, “OK, what’s the second problem?” She said, “The second problem is I don’t pray very much.” I said, “OK. When your son doesn’t show up for Sunday dinner, what happens inside of you?” She said, “I say, ‘Dear God, please let him be safe.’” [I said to her], “When those three granddaughters run up the steps of your house [and ask you], ‘Grandma, grandma, what are we going to do this afternoon?’, what do you say?” She said, “I say, ‘Dear God, I am so grateful for these children.’” I can’t at the moment remember what she said in response to the other two, but it just about all started with “Dear God.” And I said to her, “You know, I think prayer is as natural to us as breathing, but we tend to have a very skinny definition of what it really looks like. And so we miss the prayers that fill our lives and surround us every single day.”

So back to your original question [about] what happens to people in spiritual direction training programs, I think we learn about that. I think we learn that our life journey is our spiritual journey. I think we learn that prayer is as natural to us as breathing, and we value that in incredible ways in life. And that changes how we are with ourselves, and with others.