**Bob Schmidt:** In this episode, we’re going to be doing something a little different. Steve Spilde will be talking to many people who’ve been through the SDPP program. Steve, a lot of people don’t know what SDPP is. What is it?

**Steve Spilde:** SDPP is the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. It’s a three-year program where people train to become what is known as spiritual directors, or spiritual companions. Primarily, it’s an opportunity for people to become better listeners. And in order to do that, people need to examine what it is that blocks them from being good listeners. So, they create an open space within their heart so they can hear the stories of other people.

**Bob:** While doing the editing for this podcast, I had a chance to listen to a lot of different people talk about what they’ve gotten out of the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. What did you get out of it?

**Steve:** I became a better listener – period. I became a better listener to my wife, a better listener to my daughter, a better listener to my friends. And I think it opened the door for me to do the work that I do leading retreats, leading workshops, meeting with people one-to-one, [and] really hearing the stories people need to tell. In order for me to do that, I really had to learn how to listen to my own story and not edit out parts, but listen to all my story – the painful parts, the sad parts, the angry parts, the hurt parts [and] just get really comfortable. This is my story, and now I can show up and listen to whatever story you need to tell. And I’m not going to ask you to edit your story. You can tell whatever story you need to tell, and hopefully I’m prepared to hear that.

**Bob:** Who is Steve Spilde?

**Steve:** Steve Spilde is director of the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. He works as a spiritual director and retreat leader at the Franciscan Spirituality Center. Steve is husband to Jeannette and father to Sophia. Sophia has some challenges related to autism, which has been a big part of my story. It’s really opened me up to the possibility that life doesn’t always turn out the way you might plan. But sometimes these things that seem pretty bad on the front end turn out to have gifts, and turn out to offer opportunities. And that’s certainly been the case with our daughter, Sofia. [She’s a] wonderful kid. [She’s] funny. But not what I would expect.

**Bob:** Steve, would you say life turns out the way it’s supposed to turn out?

**Steve:** I don’t know if there’s a “supposed to.” I think part of that is just being open to however it turns out, that, “Wow, I think there’s goodness here.” I’m hesitant to say that because I know some people who have suffered some terrible losses, and I don’t want to disrespect them by saying, “Well, that’s the way it was supposed to happen.” I don’t know if any of these things are supposed to happen. But I do have faith that even really horrible things that happen, gifts and opportunities can come through new relationships, new learnings. And oftentimes, we find support that we didn’t know we had before.

**Bob:** Over the last many years of being the Spiritual Director Preparation Program director, I’m assuming you learned a lot of things over the years. What takeaways have you had?

**Steve:** We recently had a presenter here at the center for some other retreat. Her name is Diana Butler Bass; she was on the podcast several months ago. [She’s a] wonderful author. She was talking about the concept of re-membering. One understanding of that term “re-membering” is the “re-membering.” All of us are composed of different parts of ourselves [such as] different ages [and] different sides of our personality – just different members within ourselves. The process of "re-membering” is the bringing all those parts together [and] bringing rejected parts of ourselves back home. And I think that’s the part that’s really rewarding for me: seeing people in SDPP being able to embrace all of their stories. Maybe they had periods of loss in their life. A relationship didn’t work out. A job didn’t work out. When they tell the story of their life, oftentimes that’s a part of their story that they try to hide. [It’s] really unfortunate because sometimes that story really shapes who they are. Being able to claim all of the pieces of my story have contributed to make me who I am. And I think people come out of the program more whole, more at peace, and their hearts are more open. They’re better able to accept themselves, and accept the people they meet.

**Bob:** I think a good place to start is to find out a little bit more about the participants.

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**Steve:** How would you answer this question: Who is RaeAnn Thomas?

**RaeAnn:** I think that I am a seeker. I’m a student. I’m an explorer, maybe a detective on some days. Looking to discover that very question of who I am, I think every day it changes a little bit. I hope I change every day, except for one thing. I’m grateful. I’ve been lucky. I feel like having gratitude is a gift, and I’m grateful every day. I celebrate all of the gifts I’ve been given, and I’m pretty overjoyed by that, to know and to be able to notice all the good things in my life.

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**Steve:** Who is Janis Vittetoe?

**Janis:** Steve, this is kind of a hard one for me. The traditional answers would be wife, mother, grandmother of four, a farmer, [and] a friend who above all loves God. Another level of me would say a spiritual companion who is a compassionate listener, an empath, someone who loves meeting one-on-one, and also a person pretty far along in an ovarian cancer journey.

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**Steve:** Who is Chris Roberts?

**Chris:** I’m a person who loves people. I love to connect with others. I love music. I’m a father of three kids, so I’m very engaged with my kids. I think some of the things that would answer who I am is I love to have fun. I love to connect with people, and fortunately I have jobs that allow me to do that. As to what I do, I’m a pastor here in Madison, Wisconsin. I drive a little bit of bus, and I do some spiritual direction here and there.

**Steve:** When you came to the program, how would you have described your religious tradition, Chris?

**Chris:** I grew up in a charismatic tradition. From there, I sort of went to a different spectrum. I went more into the Evangelical faith tradition. And then I realized maybe some of my judgments about charismatic or Pentecostal were probably a little bit too harsh, and so I became part of a church movement called “The Vineyard.” All of my faith traditions have mostly been experiential – experiencing God – and since then I’ve moved from being a part of “The Vineyard” denomination to non-denominational. I’m moving more toward Ecumenical and looking at, how can I encompass and be a part of many different faith traditions? I think that would describe my journey of being a part of faith traditions.

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**Steve:** Janis …

**Janis:** I was pretty traditional Catholic. I grew up in a community that was, like, 99 percent Catholic. I said I was Catholic by osmosis. For most of my life, I didn’t really know what made me Catholic. It was a pretty big shock when I went to college in Iowa City and not everyone was Catholic. It took quite a bit of my journey just to discover who I was, and what my faith was like. Fast forward 25 years, and the parish is looking for a director of faith formation. In the end I took that job, and I told God I would take it only if he used my vulnerabilities. When I came to the program, my spirituality was in a box, framed and contained by others’ expectations. When I walked into the Franciscan Spirituality Center, my spirituality was released – I literally felt it. There was something very special about that place. Whether it’s the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration or [something else], the spirit is very alive and well there.

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**Steve:** RaeAnn ….

**RaeAnn:** I would say I was pretty much a “run of the mill Catholic,” [which included] a little bit of Catholic school [and] church on Sundays. Mom always made us get up and get ready for church whether we wanted to or not. My brothers actually cracked the code, though. When she would yell up the steps, “Get up for church!”, one of my brothers would stomp on the floor with his foot next to his bed really loud so she would think we were walking around up there, so he would buy us a little more time. But really, her getting us to church, it was a peaceful place for us to go, and I associate going to church a lot with my mom. After her death, I found a lot of closeness to her there. That was a really, really good thing. On the other hand, though, it began to feel a little bit claustrophobic at times. There were lots of things that I was hearing that kind of hemmed me in, and that was challenging for me at times. [There was] a lot of good, a little bit of frustration, but not enough that I would want to leave it.

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**Steve:** What does spiritual direction mean to you, Janis?

**Janis:** Companioning with someone on their journey. It’s a very sacred space where, through reflective questions and deep listening, the person can hear their answers already inside of them and see God or the higher power at work in their life.

**Steve:** RaeAnn …

**RaeAnn:** Steve, that’s the very first thing I learned when I started in the program, because I didn’t know what spiritual direction meant. I’m still not sure I know what Spiritual Direction means; I think I’m still learning what it is. That’s what I like about it: it’s a changing thing. The interaction with people in [spiritual] direction is very different person-to-person because they bring their needs to that time together. I do think it’s a very safe place to explore. I don’t necessarily tie spiritual direction to my Catholic tradition. In fact, most of the people that I know through [spiritual] direction are people who are not Catholic. Sometimes they express a little curiosity about Catholicism. I say, “Oh, no, I’m not the expert. You don’t want to talk to me about that.” One person brought a Bible, and I said, “Oh, no, I’m not the expert. You want to find someone else to do Bible study. This is about wandering around together.”

**Steve:** Chris …

**Chris:** I can’t get away from the definition that I heard actually during the training program: spiritual direction is taking a long, loving look at what’s real. That’s definitely been true for me. It’s been true for individuals that I’ve met with. It’s just sitting with your story and seeing, “OK, where is God showing up in my story? And what is real to my experience to who I am?” I would say for me, it’s still taking a long, loving look at what’s real in individuals’ lives.

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**Steve:** Beyond spiritual direction, how do you use the gifts you developed during SDPP? Chris?

**Chris:** I use the gifts that I’ve learned, which are how to listen deeply to people, [and] how to broaden my awareness of what’s happening in a conversation. I use it with my kids all the time. I use it in relationships, working dynamic relationships that I have. I would say that I use the gifts through all of life. It’s been amazing and super helpful.

**Steve:** Janis …

**Janis:** The gifts that I received during SDPP have actually changed every relationship I’ve had in life for the better, whether it’s the deep listening, the reflective questioning, a deeper degree of compassion and empathy, community, the unconditional giving and receiving, and just this overall deep appreciation of how well we were taken care of in and out of our sessions.

**Steve:** RaeAnn …

**RaeAnn:** As I mentioned, spiritual direction has really had a big impact on me, and I think it influences every interaction. And really, I think it influences every thought that I have, and I’m really grateful for that. It’s kind of like the temperature of the air you breathe. You can get your oxygen from all different temperatures of air. But when you’ve had spiritual direction and that training, it makes it comfortable to get that oxygen. You know that commercial you heard when we were kids, “It’s not just for breakfast anymore?” That’s kind of what I think about spiritual direction. It’s sprinkled into every part of my life. It’s not just something I do for an hour. It’s not just my own personal meditation or my own spiritual practice. It’s really every interaction I have. I find that not only what I learned in that program, but also the people that I got to meet and build relationship with help me to be, I think, a better person every day. Sometimes not even by things they meant to say. There was one person in our program who said something early on, and I remember thinking, “Wow, that woman has it together.” She left the [spiritual] direction program before our cohort graduated, but I quote her all the time because the thing she said was so profound to me. The program has changed me, and I think it changes the way I interact with everybody in my life.

**Steve:** When you came to the program, how would you have described your career to that point? RaeAnn?

**RaeAnn:** I was pretty career-oriented. I ran a counseling program, an employee assistance program. [I was] pretty business-minded, although I did have some of those same feelings or opinions about everybody should have access to a safe place to sort things out because of my counseling background. It was pretty career-oriented. I had a lot of goals. I was pretty action-oriented. Steve, we joked about I probably didn’t sleep much back then – I didn’t sleep much back then. I always had the next new thing to do, or to explore. In a leadership role with a team of other counselors, I was working hard, and I was striving to do the best I could. It was a busy and fast pace, for sure.

**Steve:** Chris …

**Chris:** I still am a pastor. I was a church planter. I’ve started a lot of new things, a lot of new ministries, as a part of my career. I would say that’s still true; I’m starting new things. I started a podcast recently. I’ve been thinking about maybe starting a spiritual center. [I’m] looking at different ways to reach people that aren’t currently being reached with programs, church, spiritual direction – whatever it is. That’s a desire that I have, and that’s how I see my career continuing to go, even in the future.

**Steve:** Janis …

**Janis:** My husband and I have farmed together since we were married 37 years ago. Changes in our operation made it possible for me to explore other areas of my life. I became a master gardener, an EMT, and then the director of faith formation at our parish. I had retired from that position for various reasons and entered a two-year desert journey asking God what was next. In Medjugorje, I got the calling to spiritual direction. Things fell into place. I found myself in the SDPP. I really that that was an answer to prayer.

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**Steve:** Since completing the program, have you changed your career? Or do you see your career in a new way? Janis?

**Janis:** Yes, my career has changed. Spiritual direction is my calling now. We still farm, and I love doing my part there. However, this is what brings me life. I love the flexibility that I have to set my own hours, and the portability of taking my practice with me wherever I am. It brings me joy to my life to sit with others, especially when they have “Aha!” moments, and there is movement that they initiate. I am grateful for the SDPP for giving me this opportunity in my life.

**Steve:** RaeAnn …

**RaeAnn:** That’s a loaded question, Steve, because my counseling career is in healthcare and mental health, so certainly it’s not a slower pace at all these days. If nothing else, it’s speeded up even more. But there feels like a greater peacefulness in my interactions with people. I now reflect back on the probably hundreds of people – maybe even thousands of people – that I’ve seen and worked with over 35 years of a social work career, and I realize that a lot of them probably, if they would have known the words, probably would have benefitted as much from good spiritual direction as they would have from counseling

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**Steve:** Was there a surprise for you in SDPP? Chris?

**Chris:** I would say that an introduction to solitude and the embracing of that practice and learning to go be by myself is probably the biggest surprise. I love solitude now. I wouldn’t say before the program that I would say, “Sign me up for solitude.” It’s kind of contrary to my personality, so I think that’s been a wonderful surprise that was passed on to me through the program.

**Steve:** Janis …

**Janis:** I mentioned my cancer journey. We had just completed our first year of SDPP when I was diagnosed with my ovarian cancer. I had a pretty major surgery and underwent quite a bit of chemotherapy. My cohort was there in this most incredible way for me. Of course, living with cancer was my primary goal. But staying with my cohort was very much a strong secondary goal of mine. The people that were in my cohort were a very special support system for me. They gave me unconditional love and support in so many different ways. One of the ways that I remember well is that my supervisor offered many times to come down to my place, if needed. I was able to go most of the time to her place, but one time I just had to say, “Yeah, it would be a lot better if you could come here.” She drove down and met me in my home and did my supervision there. People reached out. We had our own cohort group on Facebook, and people were constantly reaching out with cards [and] little gifts at just the perfect time. That cohort really became family, and has continued to be a strong support for me through going on almost eight years now.

**Steve:** RaeAnn …

**RaeAnn:** Now I have to tell on myself, huh? Yes, there definitely was a surprise. Steve, I remember the first night. The way I found out about this program, this is one of the things that made me a little nervous about who I was going to connect with in the cohort. We had a big cohort that there were priests and sisters and ministers in our cohort, and I’m thinking, “Oh, my gosh. I barely know my own religion enough. I don’t know the things other people think and believe, and the rituals.” A friend of mine said to me, “Mary Jane just graduated from SDPP.” I said, “What is SDPP?” She told me, “I don’t know. It seems like it’s some sort of religious counseling. I think that might be what it is. I don’t know. Here’s the place you can look it up.” I went home that night and I looked it up. It sounded really good. It was a great promotion for the program, and so that night I applied. It was a couple days later when I got a response saying the program is full, and I thought, “That’s OK. It’s just not meant to be.” Then a few days after that, I got another response saying, “You know what? We’re going to have a little big bigger cohort this time, so we want you to interview. We want you to come down and see if you’re right for the program.”

So, I get to the first meeting, and I’m listening to people talk about how they have thought about this and prayed about this and discerned about this – which, by the way, I had to look that word up the first night: “discern.” What the heck is that meaning? But some people for years were thinking about it before they got in, and I stood up and said, “Hi. My name is RaeAnn, and I’m from Marshfield. I heard about the program on Thursday, and I applied on Friday, and I got in by the next Wednesday.” I was worried that I wasn’t going to be serious enough because people had been thinking and praying about this for years. But then I realized that there’s really no need for that because we’re all different in the way that we approach things. Steve, you’ll get the Enneagram stuff, right? I’m a “seven.” I just jumped right in, and that was perfectly fine. There were other people who had to do a lot more thinking, and those are some of the people that I discovered the best relationships with in the program. That’s my secret. It didn’t take me long to jump in, but I was really scared when I did jump in and I heard, “Oh, my gosh, there are priests in this program. There are sisters in this program. They’re going to kick me out, for sure.” And then it didn’t happen. There’s a place for all of us here. That is a beautiful thing.