Good morning. It is good to be with you. I must confess that I had to grin a little when asked to address the future of Spiritual Direction when in the present I’m not really certain what direction is. Sandy Alwine was one of my early teachers and mentors in spiritual direction, along with Kent Groff. Sandy and I have this running joke about spending years of our lives teaching something we barely begin to understand. But the counter point is also equally true—I’m never one to hesitate jumping in and engaging the question. Perhaps looking at where I think direction might be headed can become a way to strengthen and deepen the work in the present.

Whatever else I have to say about direction I’m very clear about one thing. I know this as well as I know anything: **I want to be a spiritual director until I die.** [This is tender. Let’s pause a moment right there. Time of silence] If you can grasp that wanting—if you can inhabit that spirit of being, you have about 90% of what I want to say today.

I think spiritual director is finally rooted in a way of being and I think the future will see the manner in which at least one stream of direction flows in that course called *being*.

I remember the surprise I encountered when I first received my training in spiritual direction from Shalem. I anticipated that it would affect the way I meet with people 1:1 as a pastor. I thought it would have an impact on my prayer life. What surprised me was how it began to mess with my preaching, my teaching, my administrating, and my relationships. What I was learning about direction was changing me—and that change was rippling out into all aspects of my life.

Increasingly over the years since my training in direction and in my life as a director and as a teacher of directors, being a director is how I want to define myself. It is how I want to be in the world. It is how I want to be with others. It is how I want to gather community. And, it has everything to do with how it is I pray and how it is I work. How it is I am a husband. How it is I am a father.
We teach the trinitarian foundation for direction with rigor. We engrain the premise that in the work that is direction there is always present the three: the other, the self, and Presence itself. I guess you might say I have taught it so long that I have actually begun in some small ways to take it in at a cellular level. I want to be that trinitarian way in my relationship to all things, in my presence to all people; in my daily life at all times. Whatever I’m doing, wherever I am, I want to be there with that threefold awareness. I want to always be paying attention in this trinity of directions. I believe such a way of being opens the door to everything else.

If this notion of being a director is the river, where I think we miss the boat in our training, is when we emphasize too much that direction is about plying some very particular way of doing with others. Direction only happens when we are consciously in session, when we’ve opened in silence, when that candle is lit and we are listening intently to the other. And we teach that, rightly so, to begin to break-open the uniqueness of this spiritual direction way of being with the other. We teach that to try to distinguish how this relationship is differently grounded. But our emphasis on how the director is to act in session ignores the interior reality of the trinitarian formula—the three need to be in here too and focusing on the exterior doesn’t do much to attend the dynamic of how the spill over from direction sessions can begin to deepen the very being of the director. It is this being side of direction that I think will gather more focus and flow in the future.

This being model looks in some ways more like a cousin of monasticism than it does like a kin of the helper or therapeutic models that are often lifted up today. I think of Merton declaring himself a monk by saying: “I live in a house. What I wear is pants, what I do is live, how I pray is breathe.” Or elsewhere he wrote: “A monk is a bird who flies very fast without knowing where he is going. And always arrives where he went, in peace, without knowing where he came from.”

No notion here of prayer techniques. No controlling of the setting. No mastery of anything. What matters in this frame is the person—the whole person, not just the person in prayer, the person in a direction session, the person in the monk’s choir. It is the all of the person opening to God in the moment that matters. It is that dropping of direction into the being level that turns things toward what we cherish as the presence of direction.
Given this being model it suddenly makes more sense to me why our participants keep wanting to hang out with Oasis, why folks keep returning to take other programs or sign on to a stint with the Board, etc. I think it is rooted in this desire to be with those in whom you see the way that direction has bloomed into their being. It is only natural that such a transformation of being reaches for community, reaches for those in whom such a spirit is not thought of as weird or a little crazy even. We speak often of coming home to Oasis, coming back to the well, and in this vein there is a very literal meaning to these sayings. Home is where the heart is, and what we know as we fall deeply into the being side of direction is that our heart is drawn ever deeper into this way of being with God, this way of being with others and understanding ourselves. And this transformed self becomes our offering of presence in the session.

I did my annual prayer retreat at the Jesuit Center in Wernersville back in January this year. I was about half way through my retreat seated up on the 3rd floor alcove deep in prayer before supper when I began to hear what sounded like angels. I thought at first I might have been transported to the other side—the music was so sweet, but I eventually realized it was not that time and the music was coming down the hallway. I got up and followed the sound. The main chapel has a balcony off the third floor and I went out there and looking down to the front of the sanctuary I saw a group of about a dozen men and women all dressed in black robes—cassocks mostly, gathered together in song. I sat and watched enthralled from above. I’ve been going there for 20 years and I’ve never encountered anything like this. They were chanting the breviary for the day. I thought at first it was an Episcopal group, but then one of the brothers got up to reflect on the gospel and he quoted a lot from Martin Luther and I realized they were Lutherans. I had this flash of Garrison Keillor being jealous of my balcony moment with a group of singing Lutherans. I talked to a few of them later and learned that they were a group of pastors who had begun to sing the hours together when they were in Seminary and have continued ever since to meet once a year for retreat, to sing the hours and talk about their ministries. They call themselves “The Society of St. Gregory.” I was really taken by what they were about and the rightness of it. I know how deadly most clergy gatherings can be. But here is a group that apart from all judicatory ties has met in their own very real and nourishing way all these years. I caught most of their “hours” for the next three days and even ended up being invited to sing with them for compline the last night I was on retreat. I had my black pants of course, and
donned a black turtleneck and by that point I knew their flow well enough to fit in. It was a delightful way to end my retreat.

I came home all fired up about starting a society for directors. I even have a name: The Society of St. John of the Cross. I have this image of gathering directors on retreat once a year, not to do peer presentations, not to conference like we are these days—as good and as important as both of those more typical modalities of gathering directors are; but to gather to simply be together in prayer and community—to chant the hours while together and to share about our lives as the directors we are. Do you feel some hunger for that?

In a similar vein Cindy and I have been talking for some time about finding ways as Oasis to support the development of geographic centers or hubs. We draw persons from such a large area and so this question of how do we as graduates, as directors, find ways to gather in community to be supported in our work and in our being as directors, is a big one. I think this is a vital issue going forward. How do we create and sustain communities of directors so our unique sense of being will not simply survive but thrive where we are. I think these waters of being are going to grow, are going to flow.

There are other waters that flow off the mountain of direction via other channels. I’m not going to dwell here but I want to name in contrast that I see a larger body of water that flows toward the doing side of direction. This river is giving increasing attention to professionalizing direction, to getting it right, to refining the language, the techniques and understandings of direction. All of this can bring some corrective to the roots of the tradition in the mystery of God, but it also drives direction closer to the helping professions and their accompanying concerns. The future flow of this river will push for the certification and perhaps even licensing of directors. The practice of direction is ancient, but as we move increasingly away from alignment with the institution of the church and its authority there will be felt more of a need to clarify and certify directors and establish a code for what we do. You don’t have to look any further than the identity crisis pastoral counseling has gone through to understand what is here for directors. The desire to have something solid in the world, the desire for respectability, the need to have consistency in practice and all the professionalism that goes with it is evident right now within the spiritual direction community.
And now we are being welcomed back into Seminaries—which I’m delighted for, and the rigor of this association can bring many gifts to us; but the relationship will also bring with it pressures to have the model of what we do fit the academy. I think the challenge here on both sides of the aisle is to let each tradition keep the depth of their roots. To have the academy push from its knowledge base the pursuit of the Holy and all the understanding that goes with it. And for the seminary to welcome the director community as those who practice a yielding to the Presence and all the mystery that goes with it.

And now back to the mystery—obviously my preference of perspective.

**Romancing Silence:** [Let’s pause for some silence] Sandy Alwine shared with me a story of his childhood that I’ve cherished ever since. He said that when he was a young boy in Texas, like 6 years old or so, his favorite thing to do was to walk into the woods that surrounded his home until he was deep enough in that he was sure he was lost. And then, when he was absolutely certain he had no idea of where he was, he would sit down on a stump or rock and savor being lost. He cherished being lost. Don’t you love it? This is how a mystic like Sandy does childhood. Eventually he would get up and find his way out—but the point wasn’t to get out. The point was to savor being lost. Direction isn’t the way out of whatever woods a directee finds herself in. If anything direction is about helping folks savor the mystery they are lost in; to savor the life they are in no matter the lack of understanding or ease in it. Directors here not as guides who point the way out of the thicket, but guides who are comfortable enough in their own skin to accompany the other into the heart of the thicket opening to the Presence knit to every moment of lostness therein. To romance the silence is to stay in love with all those moments that defy dreams and confound understanding—those moments that default toward desert and wilderness. To love right into the heart of all those gaps in the other’s life, those places that don’t make sense and probably won’t any time soon. To look into the moist eyes of the other and hear stories of what it is like to turn into God when caught in their own stretch of dark forest. To cherish the mystery of the lostness of the other even as you cherish the mystery of the hidden God, and the mystery that is your own life.

Clearly direction is more art than science, but even there it is more akin to being an artist in those moments when the artist hits the emptiness of the
canvas. Who is the artist when creativity meets the quiet sea? When what one plies in the world is suddenly still and what opens in that moment is the Presence of the Creator apart from creation and the flow of creativity. Raw presence. Un-mediated presence. The empty cup that holds the ocean as poet Denise Levertov says. Rest there. Be the director there. You were made for such moments.

**Tending Soul:** One of the things I noticed when I stepped out of the pastorate and opened up my practice of direction, was the number of folks that came to me that I would not have seen walk into my pastoral study--people that aren’t actively connected to a religious tradition. Clearly many of you do direction from within the church and that can be a powerful way of restoring direction to its rightful place at heart of the church’s ministry. But as more and more people exit faith communities directors will find themselves playing an increasingly needed role of accompanying people in their spiritual longings, which of course are still going to be there as they are an ongoing part of what it means to be human. The phrase for me that seems to convey something of this work is “Tending Soul.” Such a phrase points to the work that remains when persons are no longer part of communities of faith that have historically done the tending. One of the key questions going forward is how does the church help address the spiritual needs of those folks not in church? There are some exciting models out there, and one of them is near me in State College where the Presbyterian church and pastor Joel Blunk, Kim Hunziker and Jackie Hook, who is with us here this weekend, are doing in the creation of their ministry *The WheelHouse*, that is positioning itself in the community as a hub for formation and direction.

As we do this work apart from faith communities, we have to open to larger stories of spirit, open to various borrowings from assorted traditions, opens to myths that don’t sound familiar to church ears, and open in a fresh way to creation itself—God’s first love affair.

Let me share a story from this edge by William Plotkin, who is one of those tending souls apart from church. He tells a story about a young woman in her teens that found herself in deep despair. She lived in Chicago and she was in her family’s bathroom ready to take her own life. For some strange reason she thought of a guy in her school. He wasn’t on the in list. He himself was on the edge and walked his own path. She couldn’t get him out of her mind and so she called him and asked him if he ever felt darkness like she was experiencing it and if so what he did. He said that when he felt that
way what he liked to do was walk down to the shore of Lake Michigan in winter and watch the ice breath. He said the ice appears solid and totally frozen over and then the swell of the wave comes in and the ice comes apart into thousand of pieces that rise and separate on the wave and then as the wave passes, fall back together again. Seeing that always gave him hope. This young woman did the same. She walked down to the frozen lake and watched the ice breath. It gave her hope. She choose to live a new life. She left her home and began to do just that.

For persons not in church there will never be an altar call, but do you think for a minute that God’s redemptive activity ever stops? How do we direct there where there are no familiar altars and the solid institutional land we are used to isn’t even land but frozen water that heaves and breathes?

Being comfortable in the dark woods, being at ease and even cherishing the mystery apart from tradition, is not to be confused with a lack of intimacy. Learning to savor the lost moments, the not knowing, the lack of clarity, actually becomes a way into intimacy with Presence rather than a foundation for despair or cynicism. My guide here in addition to this young woman in Plotkin’s story, is the beloved disciple, who on the night when everything fell apart, when everything changed dramatically, came to that last supper, and in the reclined dining style of the day, he ate in front of Jesus and leaned his back onto Jesus. I so treasure this image of loving, spiritual intimacy. It is not the intimacy of knowing. The beloved disciple didn’t know what was coming down. He couldn’t even in the moment, see Jesus; but he leaned back into the one he couldn’t see—he was intimate there. Jesus had his back and that was enough. He could and did go on from there. What an anchor for contemplation. The great intimacy of contemplation is not because of what is seen, but the leaning back into what can not be seen—the trusting in what can not be known. This is why we doggedly teach contemplation alongside of direction. Contemplation brings the foundation of a familiarity with not knowing, not seeing, and the great comfort of an abiding intimacy. This combination of staying grounded in love amidst all that is not seen or known or understood, becomes the cornerstone of the director’s being. It is from there that all accompanying and any guidance can take place. It is from there that a freedom is realized, greater than any skill, or technique, or knowledge can secure.

What would it mean—say the words—if direction more and more became our primary way of being? What would it mean if what mattered most in our
lives was how we romanced silence and tended soul? Who will we be, who
will we become, if we are directors until we die?