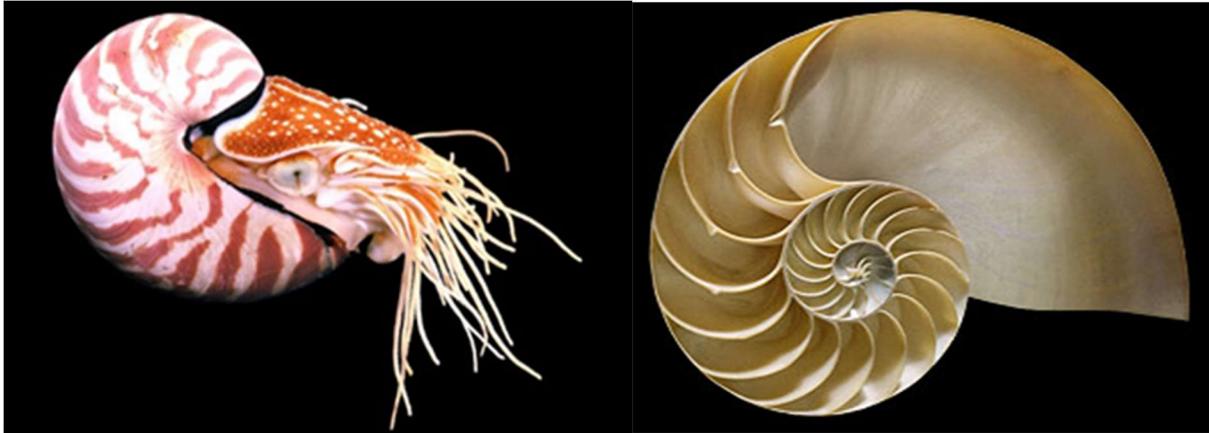


**Reflection on an extended metaphor for spiritual direction:
the Nautilus pompilius.**

Sally Longley (originally given as part of the ANSD President's Report, 2017)



I am sure many of us have come across this beautiful shell, but perhaps like me have not spent much time reflecting on the animal to whom this stunning home belongs. I have often used this shell as part of a prayer focus table when facilitating retreats. But I began to become very curious and began asking how it was made, where did it come from, and who used to live in it? After doing some initial reading I began to get very excited and decided to visit a family friend who has worked at the Australian museum for over 40 years in this area of sea shells and molluscs. I spent a fascinating time with him and he sent me away with one of his huge tomes on this particular shell. And more and more I could see what an amazing metaphor the Nautilus pompilius is for spiritual direction!

The Nautilus pompilius is part of a group called cephalopods, to which squids, cuttlefish and octopus also belong.

The spiral

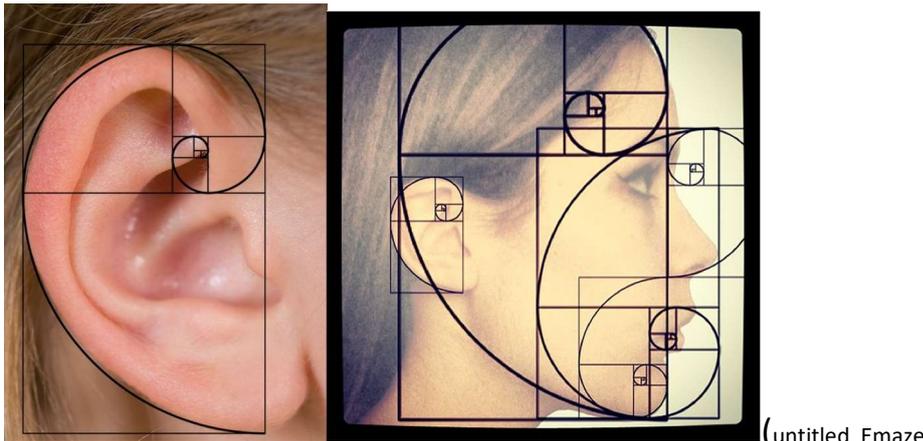
One of the first things we see is the spiral. This has its obvious reminder to us that growth is not a linear path but rather a spiral. Spiralling can feel disorientating, but we come back not to the same place, but a place that might feel similar but we are further on, and we see things this time around differently. Many a time a directee may be tempted to say, "I am just back where I started". It may feel as if it is the same place, but they are actually further on. This is the encouragement of the spiral.

The dimensions of the spiral may be seen as having the characteristics of a Fibonacci spiral (although there is some dispute between authors as to whether the nautilus holds to a true mathematical representation of this). But this Fibonacci pattern is the same pattern that so many other things in nature exhibit, such as the humble cabbage, a pine cone or even galaxies.



(<http://sciencevibe.com/2015/06/04/the-fabulous-fibonacci-sequence-in-nature/>)

As humans, we also embody something of this same pattern, as depicted below. As Spiritual directors we are engaged in deep listening, and so we are listening in to the lives of our directees as they engage in life in this amazingly beautifully patterned cosmos! It is also a reminder too, that we are called to embody Christ to others; that Christ has no hands or feet or ears now but ours. So the call for us as spiritual directors is to listen deeply as we put the shell to our ears and listen in to the very heart design of all that is life.



(<https://au.pinterest.com/pin/289567451016204443/>).

Creating new homes

You will notice that the shell has a number of compartments. The animal begins as quite small, and so the compartment that comprises its home is quite small. But as it grows, it needs to make a bigger compartment – it needs to upsize into a new apartment, if you will, and so makes a new section that it moves forward into. These hammock-like apartments leave the smaller ones behind, thus enabling those early compartments to hold air. The air is essential for the animal’s buoyancy, and it regulates this using the siphuncle. This is an umbilical-like tube that goes right to the beginning of the spiral and grows outwards with the spiralling growth, making a fine tubular connection through the centre of each compartment. Not only is the air regulated through this siphuncle but so too is water that is drawn in to these compartments and then out again giving the shell a push-along. So the water and air is shifted by this

very clever little animal depending on where it wants to move to and whether it wants to go up or down. Air and water. *Ruach* – spirit - and living water. We need both these to help guide our movements and to keep us from sinking. They are our life source, our umbilical cord, and we cannot survive as spiritual directors without keeping this connection open and unbroken, connecting us to the True Centre who is God.

Living at depth

The nautilus lives at depths of up to 500meters. This is very unusual, and is far deeper than divers can go and hence beyond tourism! Not a lot has been known about the shell because of this, and only recently ways have been developed to draw these animals up to the surface where they can be caught and examined. But it is well known that the nautilus moves slowly, and has been dubbed the ‘swimming snail’. It is slow to mature and has slow reproductive rates. So like the nautilus, the ministry of spiritual direction is a deep ministry, and much of the work goes unseen, and unknown. It is not for tourists but for pilgrims. And the work of God in us and in our directees is the slow work of God. Slow is good! It is counter-cultural, and it is a reminder that the speed of our supermarket culture might be attractive but not long-lasting. Indeed the very nature of the spiritual direction ministry is a call to live deeply, to see deeply, to hear deeply. And this takes time. It is a vital part of our contemplative practice. And we don’t reproduce quickly – formation of directors by God is usually a slow process!

The shining

One aspect of the immense beauty of the shell is its shining, pearly interior. This substance is called nacre – the same substance that pearls are made of. For the nacre to form, there is need of an irritant. In the case of a pearl this can be a grain of sand that the pearl then forms around. But in the case of the Nautilus pompilius the irritant is very fine, and so the nacre forms throughout the whole shell. Nacre is both beautiful and strong. There is a car company in the USA that is researching nacre to see if it can develop a car paint that has this strength and sheen to it.

So beauty arises from working positively with irritants such as difficulty, and it is found on the inside only. It is also strong, having the resilience to hold the space for another’s story of pain and conflict. It is also a reminder that just as the nacre forms a protective barrier for the nautilus, so too spiritual directors need to make sure they are involved in self-care and protection of the self. The beauty of the shell is only ever seen once the animal inside has died and the shell has been washed up on the coast. The wonder of what God does during some of the spiritual direction sessions may never be seen by us, but after we have gone, a shell may be washed up that shows the beauty and wonder of God’s handiwork. And as with this wonderful shell, this is a way of living, not

simply a job or a technique. May we be shining with such beauty and resilience on the inside too.

A way of seeing

Lastly, the nautilus pompilius has a very simple pinhole eye with no lens. But cameras that take pinhole photographs produce images that have nearly infinite depth of field, everything appears in focus, and there is no lens distortion! And of course, they can see in the dark. Now that is a way of seeing that I think most spiritual directors would aspire to.

So in summary, the Nautilus pompilius offers us a very rich extended metaphor for the ministry of spiritual direction. May we live at depth, not tempted to live in the shallow waters; to remember that spiralling growth can be disorientating and seem slow, but where patience is one of our guides. It is a way of listening into the deep patterns of life, and a way of seeing that aspires to accuracy, no distortion and with great depth of field. Where we can be guides to others in the dark. Where we develop a form of nacre that shines, and yet knowing this may only be seen way after we have moved on – and perhaps only by God – but that it is a holy beauty of great strength. So, welcome to the swimming snail community that has God as its True Centre.