

Ignatian Legacy:
The Dynamic of Discernment
[Fr. Monty Williams](#)

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The Dynamics of Discernment

We looked at the passionate view of Ig the pilgrim when we started. What we saw was Ig the explorer rather than pilgrim. There is a huge difference between a pilgrim and an explorer, a pilgrim goes to known sites and an explorer goes into the unknown and transforms that unknown. We are all each of us in between the known and unknown. How do we deal with that? We deal with it passionately re Cecil's exposition of how to be passionate. Many forms of passion. Highest form is creativity. Marlene opened the world sensitively and creatively and the risk she took in opening up the world. Story of acrobat who walked along the tight rope, in the middle of which is circle and do somersault thru the circle of fire. Some days he was dreadfully afraid and he didn't do it. And if he was asked why he did it, his answer is what stays with me "*I do it because my life is on the other side*". Ignatian spirituality is a spirituality of risk and when we risk, we can be seen to be silly. We are silly because we are so driven by passion that forget prudence. And sometimes we are so prudent, that we forget our passion. How to balance passion and prudence? Risky. That is where discernment comes in.

What is discernment?

I think that in some sense our lives as witnesses give direction to joy. And so when I talk of us being spiritual directors, I talk of us as how we witness to discernment? Understand in some deep and profound sense that God desires us and that we desire us. Quote Hegel in the Phenomenology of Spirit: "Desire desires desire" The big "Desire" that is God desires the small desire, that is us. Vice versa. Discernment is when passion meets passion. Trouble with passion meeting passion, it is precisely there that we have a look at discernment. What is that passion? A person is defined by what they do, their habits, their orientations, their sense of identity. Imagine a poet writing poem about bees. Says something about the poet. Creation is not the creator. We ask ourselves why does poet write poem about bees? What is the habit of the poet that allows her to see bees in that way? It's the habit of attentiveness and of reflection and it is the constant habit that manifests itself in the poem. Those habits reveal an orientation towards mystery. I think that good poets are poets that point us towards mystery in the concreteness of life and we have the peculiar poet's identity, mystery being attentive to mystery, a desire acknowledging a Desire that desires her. Hopefully this example works for you.

In each of our lives is a tension. The basic tension is between fear and love. How our attention manifests itself is precisely in those acts, habits, orientations, and our sense of identity. Look that the dynamics of fear. A directee liked gambling, mortgaged the house and stole money from the bank. Obsession led to addiction and so possessed that he lost his life in a way. There is a sense in which each of us has a pattern that manifests the pattern of fear. Need to realize the pattern in ourselves first. But there is another pattern for which we are grateful, a pattern of love that calls us and seeks to transform us and liberate us from our fears. That's a pattern that starts off indifference, in North America seen as spiritual apathy. I like to suggest that indifference really is to be so passionate for God that one sees and understands everything in the light of that passion.

So the compulsion where we are driven to something, we have this passion and as opposed to obsessions, we can have choices. For most of us, our lives are very ritualized. Rituals of getting up and rituals of breakfast. Ritual of staying in bathrobe which gives me freedom to do something – bathrobe allows me to write- but sometimes we can so obsessed by habits that don't give us freedom to choose and we can become addicted to even piety, a certain way of how God or certain people should behave and then we lose freedom and that sense of being able to dance with God, to be flexible and silly at times. We can truly be free when we have this dynamic relationship with the Father.

The humility we have is that we are not the Creator but one manifestation of energies of Creator who is light itself. When we are humble, it is not a form of self abrogation. When we are humble, we are only concerned with this dance with God. Mother Teresa said we are not called be successful but to

be faithful. I think we are faithful by being humble. I think when we are humble, people think we are proud and vice versa.

How does this manifest itself in our lives? The tensions of fear vs tensions of love. See handout

Week 1

Let's look at what happens when we start 1st week of the exercises. I think we start basically because even though we are contented, there is a sort of discontented and that is why we are in spiritual direction. Truly happy people never come for spiritual direction. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Such restlessness drives us in some sense into the exercises. We start off those ex in an interesting way, we come bringing in the world we lived in, the imagined world that defines us and makes us secure. As we encountered this God who desires us, this God who not only affirms us in that world and calls us beyond that world and we enter into the risk to give up the world we know for the strange darkness that calls us beyond ourselves. Life and death struggle. Kierkegaard talks about it as a sickness unto death. The ones who come to you hate you in the first week because you don't encourage them to maintain their nice world. And you are not entering their nice world and saying to them you are a nice, nice person. You have to stay outside of being conned into their world. It's painful to watch someone suffering, like watching someone drowning. When they let go, they discover that they don't drown but are held in love bigger and deeper than their world and a kind of rootedness in the mystery we call Father which is a huge liberation.

Often the secure world we live in is fraught with anxiety. Huge uncertainty. Underneath the secure world we think we live in is the pervasive sense of anxiety and it shapes our world. But when discover we are held by God, we are filled with this peculiar sense of awe, "how is this possible?" The anxiety before giving this session drives me crazy. Slept pretty well, without the familiar anxiety. Note the goodness of God. I expect a certain thing but something else happened! Note what I am working at. I am working at the level of experience, what am I experiencing?

So we move to that second level, it is interesting that Ignatius has a thing that used to bother me, but now it doesn't. When in consolation, be prepared for desolation and vice versa. I thought what a way to spoil your consolation by thinking of desolation. I am happy when I am in desolation to think of consolation but not the other way around. I needed to pray or reflect about this. For me, it was in Jeremiah, said to God you seduced me and I allowed myself to be seduced. And he finds himself in this dark place. What love does? Love affirms us, in such a way that we can start walking to the borders of our known world coz we are so filled with passion for God that we enter into darkness but when we enter, God disappears and we are left in that darkness and we try to get back to the previous world but it doesn't work. We can't escape the darkness and finally, slowly our eyes become accustomed to the darkness, we start seeing a little path and we start walking and stumbling, The path gets clearer and the destination blurs again. Then you get seduced by the little pup and at first you reject the dog because you have been deceived before but after a while, you get seduced eventually by the cute puppy. Guess what happens again. You find yourself in consolation. Ok this is good. And the same thing repeats over and over again.

A Jewish mystic said "I have reached the stage where I cannot distinguish between consolation and desolation." In some sense, desolation is parts of life that are waiting to be transformed and desolation is that which wraps the gift. When we embrace that desolation, the gift opens up and we realize the gift that we never had, parts of our lives or relationships we thought we never had and we become more alive and passionate. It becomes our consolation. Desolation is an odd form of consolation and vice versa. I say this because when we are rooted interestingly enough, when we have the experience of being so deeply held in God's love, it is not that we have been changed but we are let out of the prison of our known world. Like prisoners who have been let out of their prisons of their known world, we carry that prison with us. Then it carries us to 2nd week. What we bring to that passion or the sense of being rooted, we bring all the old stories/narratives with us to another story. The story that is given to us is in the stories of the gospels.

Week 2

In 2nd week, our stories meet the story of Christ and it is a very interesting meeting. Interestingly and cunningly Ig arranges aspects of those stories in a particular way for a particular point. An example.

Before you have the public life of Jesus, Ig asked us to consider the private life of Jesus. In the 2nd last prayer is the finding in the temple. Before this *is the hidden life* from age 12 to 30. Why does he invert it, why the hidden life and then the finding in the temple- it is not chronologically correct. Orientating us to something, what does Jesus say at the temple – “I must be about my Father’s business”.

The 2nd Week is basically about Jesus being about the Father’s businesses. As we enter the 2nd week of the exercises, we pray for the profound intimacy, out of which flows love, out of which flows service. For most of us, love leads to intimacy but for Ignatius, it is intimacy that leads to love. Intimacy is being rooted in God. Out of this intimacy flows this love and out of this love flows service. How to get people in some sense to live out of this intimacy? Jesus is there for us to orient ourselves and be oriented towards the Father.

How do you know that you have the graces of the second week? But I love Jesus, but what does that mean? When you love someone, they reveal themselves to you. What does Jesus reveal? Jesus most intimate secret is his relationship to the Father. When you truly know Jesus, you get to know the Father in the second week. John’s gospel. Why do we have to get to know the Father? Our stories don’t hold us into life but the mystery does.

The dynamic of our 2nd week is developing a relationship with Mystery and allowing Mystery to develop a relationship with us. So we don’t hold on to the stories when we find ourselves caught up in this mystery. Bees’ poem is in some sense is the manifestation of the mystery, which is bigger than a poem about bees. In the 2nd week, the tension we are held in is do we live out of story; live by or out of mystery that calls us.

Pointing finger is not the moon. Once you see the moon, you don’t need the finger. What you discover is the light of the moon which illuminates the finger. Theology is a form of superior science fiction, an entertainment and sometimes gets so serious that they forget that they point to life and not for themselves. Systems are precisely there so that we can be pushed off the edge into the mystery. Theology leads us to a sense of wonder rather than a sense of anxiety.

Mystery is bigger than ideology. People try to find ideologies that put Jesus in place. He doesn’t care as he cares only about Father. As we journey with Jesus in 2nd week, we start becoming less concerned about ideology. We become more concerned about the mystery that embraces us and we desire to be embraced.

Week 3

3rd week we consider passion, suffering and the death of Christ. When you are dancing with mystery, it is an incredible power. You become charismatic, and it is intoxicating. You can try to use that power to maintain yourself. Deception,. What happens if you are truly passionate about the mystery and the mystery is passionate about you is that you can start giving up more and more of yourself ie giving up power to control your life and the power to shape the world that you know, that you think should be. In 3rd week, we follow a man becoming more and more vulnerable and more and more empty. In 2nd week. we learn like Jesus to wait more and more on the Father, being attentive and wait for Father to tell us what to do, we try not to run ahead of grace. Jesus in 3rd week waits on the Father, waits in the agony in the Garden, waits on the cross, waits in death. He waits.

In some sense as we claim to be followers of Jesus, to be members of the Society of Jesus, Jesuits and Ignatian people, we wait on the Father even when we find ourselves in dreadful places, when life is taken away from us. José was talking about the plague. The scholastics and tertians were sent off but the old fathers remained. The question is “why did they decide to stay”? I’d like to suggest they didn’t decide to stay. What they decided to do was to wait on the Father to tell them what to do. And if the Father chose that they wait in a plague-ridden city and die, they were happy to do that bcoz their joy was in waiting on the Father. The gift of the third week is the gift of learning emptiness. I can’t imagine anything more difficult bcoz even your desire gets taken away. In some sense you are beyond spaces, beyond feelings, beyond emotions, beyond imagination and you struggle through day after day.

Waiting in emptiness we can become so accustomed to that emptiness that we think that is all there is, and fall into living the life of status quo. The Desire that desires us is deeper than even our experience of emptiness. Out of the emptiness comes something that is quite remarkable, there come moments of incredible creativity that transform the world in such a way that we see the world fresh again.

Week 4

4th week of exercises is the gift of creativity. If I had more time I'd have shown you this Jesuit architecture called the Rock of Hope. It's like trying to express what is beyond form. How to express the inexpressible – that's creativity. My favorite story is about Picasso. During the war when he was living in Nice, he used to go down to the swimming pool. One day he passed the junk yard, he picked up 2 things and went back to his house to attach them together with two pieces of wire : handlebar of a bicycle and the seat saddle, and joined them together to form the head of a bull called "Tete de Taureau". It's now displayed in the Paris Museum. What I like about the story is what the world discards as junk, the creative person sees the possibility of new life. See possibility in the world that we do not see before. We don't need more theologians but more poets who wash over our world with possibilities. Ignatian Spirituality does that. The highest form of creativity is community - community within ourselves, with each other, within nations and with creation. Ignatian vision is creation of that community. This conference is one example of that creativity. A huge effort and when it comes together, people of different races, religions and beliefs come together and share life and their stories, I think it's a huge gift.

Some sense of the tensions that you have, the dynamics of discernment is precisely the tensions between security and rootedness, ideology and mystery, power and emptiness, status quo and creativity.

One of the things that happens oddly enough is that the stories we live out of in the contemporary world are stories we look for security, meaning and community and in some sense to maintain ourselves. We get transformed when God enters into our story that we find not security but rootedness, not meaning but mystery, we discover not status quo but freedom, and not power but creativity. Ignatian vision invites us to creativity.