

The Kingdom Exercise()
And The
Use Of Myth In Spiritual Direction**

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Chapter 25
Orientations Vol 2: Part B

Ignatius of Loyola was born at a time when most of Spain was about to be united under one king. The Muslims(1) were finally being defeated and the nation was beginning to experience itself under one flag, one king under God. There was an exuberant expectation that the whole world could be Christian! Energized by this powerful myth, explorers ventured towards new lands and made claims for king and God. From myths such as this emerged the belief in the "divine right of kings" -- a belief that has affected politics, philosophies and religions since that time.

Ignatius was part of the emerging world of humanism with its stress on the value of the human mind as a primary way of discovering the truth about God's creation. Even though Renaissance culture was taking hold during his lifetime, Ignatius' worldview remained medieval. He embodied the culture of chivalry with its yearnings of courtly love. In some ways he was a Don Quixote with expansive dreams and worlds to conquer for his liege lord, under king and God. He had a medieval image of the cosmos. In this image, all creation was hierarchically ordered.(2) This order was to be imitated by the social order(3) with class distinctions, trades and special vocations. All this was gathered up into Ignatius' personal myth of the king which was imprinted in his very psyche.(4)

It is no wonder then that when he experienced his conversion during the time of his recovery in the castle at Loyola, Ignatius' cultural and personal myth which had given him so much energy was unconsciously mobilized and transformed. The parable of the king in the Kingdom Exercise is precisely that myth expressed more consciously and Ignatius' application of the parable to Lord Jesus as the Eternal King is a conscious record of how it was transformed in his very heart and soul. Before his conversion, he was fascinated by daydreams and fantasies of doing great deeds for the ideal lady and the ideal lord. After his conversion, he was fascinated by daydreams and fantasies of doing great deeds for *the Lord Jesus in service of the Divine Majesty*.

In all of us, there are similar energies that give direction, potency and meaning to our lives. They develop through the processes of our own psyches and imaginations which are influenced in a multiplicity of ways: stories we listened to as children, songs we sang, role models we experienced, images we ingested from movies and television, games we played, poetry and stories we read, historical events and movements of our own time. These archetypal energies coalesce into powerful imagery made up with images, dreams, ideologies, visions, etc., which express our heartfelt desires. The expression of these desires in story form or in some other imaginative figure can be called a myth. There are personal myths, communal myths,

organizational myths, religious myths, and national myths.

These myths draw upon unconscious energies fed by our own history whether personal or collective. Certain songs hold our attention hauntingly. Young men trained in a macho way will greet you with a handshake reminiscent of the rough cowboy John Wayne. People vote to establish a nation or to separate from a nation based on their sense of what it means to have a different identity. Native people of North America experience healing and grow in self-esteem by rediscovering their historical roots and by expressing these in dance and story. We cry at a wedding as we celebrate our collective dreams and hopes for the couple as they covenant themselves to each other. The acceptance speeches of new political leaders express the myths of their parties. On July 4th in the U.S.A., tens of thousands of people gather in the large cities of the nation to celebrate their national identity. Flags abound. With sounds of cannons and displays of fireworks, symphonic orchestras perform the powerful 1812 Overture. Such large gatherings would ordinarily be a source of traffic jams, frustration and violence, but on this special day, filled with the myths of their nation, people are joyously peaceful.

In an opposite mode, leaders and politicians throughout history have mobilized their countries for war by "demonizing" or creating "counter-myths" against the communal enemy. Through these counter-myths, they called forth the idealism, the sense of responsibility that marshalled the nation's forces. Hitler used the music of Wagner, the icons of the Roman Empire, the beat of drums, the flames of large torches and the darkness of night to mesmerize his hearers.

Many people are not aware of how they are focused and energized by myths. Yet they fall in love and in that process either lose track of or discover their deepest thoughts and feelings about their lives and their own personal identities. What is it that motivates people to join organizations, to enter religious monasteries, to commit themselves to their loved ones, to redecorate their homes, to dress for special occasions, to vote for political parties, to join communities? It is that coalescence of dreams and assumptions constantly influencing and affecting us below our personal consciousness. These less-than-conscious energies are part of our corporate and personal myths.

Myths operate predominantly below consciousness.⁽⁵⁾ Myths can express the direction of our lives and help us express what is ultimately ineffable -- the world of ultimate meaning. Thus, my working definition of myth is a coalescence of values, images, insights, dreams, meanings that give energy and focus to our lives.

Application To The Kingdom Exercise

I used to assume that directees who came from a good First-Week experience would automatically harmonize with the parable in the Kingdom Exercise and easily apply it to themselves. Indeed some directees still do. But others can not. They have to *work at it*; that is, they, with their guides, have to come up with examples to try to make the parable effective. However even when the parable of the king does work, it seems to me that it often does not have the impact that some commentators suggest it should have. This has always struck me as being problematic.

When I raise my concern with other directors, some do not seem to perceive their directees having the difficulties that I find. Those directors who do resonate with my concern, frequently explain it in the following ways:

- We live in democracies and are no longer familiar with kings and queens;
- The Kingdom Exercise uses male imagery;
- In the postmodern world, we no longer have heroes and heroines.

While these explanations help us to understand some level of the difficulty, I believe they are more superficial and less helpful than an explanation that involves the interface between the Kingdom Exercise and a directee's personal myth: *if the image of King is not part of the personal myth of a directee, then she is not going to be able to relate to this exercise effectively.* In other words, if the archetypal images in a directee's less-than-conscious part of her psyche are not harmonious with those of leader, heroine, or queen, the Kingdom Exercise will not harmonize with or foster the expected energy so obviously featured.(6)

How can a director of the Exercises encourage his directee to develop her own personal myth and to discover Jesus within it the way Ignatius suggests in the Kingdom Exercise? By encouraging a directee to release creatively her deepest dreams and hopes about herself in a context of a dominant image and if possible a story. In line with this, a director could invite his directee to reflect and pray over one or other of the following:

- If you could take your deepest desire, your vision for yourself in the world and express it in a story, what would it be?
- If you were to die five years from now, for what concrete things or ways of behaving would you like to be remembered in an honest obituary about you? What would you really need in order to survive with energy and meaningful enthusiasm?
- What images give you life?
- What stories of the recent past capture your dreams for yourself in the next decade?
- If you could take your deepest desire and vision for the world and express it in a personal myth or story, what would it be? What type of person would embody this vision? What would be an appropriate and expected response to this person? Since Jesus is the embodiment of all our deepest desires, what prayer or offering do you desire to make now?

After a directee ponders these questions and begins to surface some of the aspects of a new developing myth, she then goes to a prayer exercise carrying these facets within her heart and asks God's Spirit to reveal the image, story, hope or dream that coalesces all these aspects. In other words, in the context of enlightening grace, her less-than-conscious self surfaces the image

that is most meaningful to her at this time in her life.

Long before giving a directee the above questions, some groundwork would probably have been laid for a directee's development of her personal myth. Perhaps as a result of the enlightenment during the Third Exercise [63], she would have come to terms with some of the world's influences on her 'counter-myth' that have been controlling her life. If her guide were following Prayer Units 10-15, he would be laying further groundwork for her to develop her myth by encouraging her to reflect and ponder upon the dreams of God for the world. Then in the Gospel Contemplations on Jesus' early years, he would be furthering this even more by encouraging her to reflect on the dreams of Mary and Joseph and how these dreams had to be refashioned by the political circumstances around Jesus' birth and infancy -- how Mary and Joseph had to redevelop their own personal myths.

The following example about a bag-lady crone was originally written by a directee(7) in response to the last of these questions along with the text of the Kingdom Exercise:

Her Dream

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all people were to realize their own personal goodness loved into them by their Mother Creator. All people would then share their goodness and love with each other and with the very earth itself. With this realization, there would be an end to violence in all its various forms. If we all shared such a vision we would not neglect, exploit or injure in any way each other or our planet.

A Story About A Crone -- Embodiment Of This Dream

She is wiry and brown, old in her wisdom and compassion, young in her energy and enthusiasm. Her dark hair is wild and loose and greying, her face weathered into beauty, her hands rough and large and gentle, her steps light and given to dancing. She is quick to laugh with delight, to weep with sorrow, to confront with truth. Her clothing is simple, pieced together -- a plain red tunic under a huge, flowing dark cloak with a hood and great sleeves and many large pockets; she has no shoes and always carries a great many large woven bags banded with colours, slung over her shoulders and tied to her belt and hung from her arms. She has no home and no job. All she does is walk endlessly, every day, telling her wonderful story to anyone and anything that will listen, sometimes singing on her way, a strange, wordless song which enchants her followers with its spiritual tune.

Everyone she meets is invited to sit down with her and to hear her fascinating story of the Creator's wonderful gift. With her open-armed welcome, few can resist her loving invitation, and her story is so compelling, few can resist staying right until the last word is spoken. At the end of the story, her warm eyes turn to all who have listened and she invites them to reach into their hearts and gather up all the violence within them. The crone then holds out her arms with the huge bags and they place what they found in their hearts into the bags. After all the violence has been taken in by the crone, each person then reaches into one of the crone's deep pockets to draw out a special heart-gift to replace the violence.

Reaching in, each one finds the pocket empty.

Then the crone says, with her smiling eyes: "Yes, take the precious gift of "nothing" -- take it ever so gently, and place it in your heart. Let it become the empty space inside of you that will be open to receiving love, that can hold all in love...."

Some accept the gift, and go away renewed in the discovery of the wonder and excitement of the change they have experienced. Some, however, cannot accept this; they are enraged that the crone would give them nothing after giving her all that was in their hearts. They fling back the "nothing" at the crone, and upon its impact with her, all their old violence returns to their hearts. They leave the crone, shouting back, "Crazy old woman!" The crone's sorrow adds to the weight she is carrying and she buckles beneath it.

At the end of each day, the crone is weary, hungry and footsore, burdened with the terrible weight of the violence in her bags. She doesn't complain, for she is strengthened by her hope in her Creator's love. She disappears into the quiet, recreating mystery of night's darkness; those remaining nearby often hear a strange, haunting melody, far away and incredibly lovely in the night into which she has gone. In the morning's first light she reappears, fresh and light of step, rejuvenated by the past night's communion with her Creator. She is eager to set out again, with her coloured bags dangling empty, and ready to take on more of creation's darkness.

Some of those who have received her gift remain with her. They sing her song and, eager to learn the secrets of her night song, are drawn to follow her on her quest.

Her Offering

Lover of All, with your gracious help and compassion, I desire to commit myself to you and your dream for the world. It is my heartfelt desire to follow you in bearing in my own life whatever violence and poverty I shall encounter if I, like you, encourage my sisters and brothers to let go of their violence which is expressed in oppressive and unjust ways.

Application To Other Ongoing Spiritual Direction Settings

In ongoing spiritual direction, a guide can sometimes use this notion of myth to understand the underlying issues involved in a directee's transitional struggles. In the dilemma of mid-life, often a directee's personal myth is no longer working. A new myth has to emerge before new energy is found for the future. This could be true of the gay man called to mourn the loss of the possibility of ever having a family. This could also be true of a mother of grown children called to mourn the loss of one part of her life in order to move on with another. A divorced or separated woman must come to terms with a new myth. The concept of developing one's myth can apply to other life issues such as career choices, retirement issues, dealing with expectations of one's peers. When you are able to help your directee tap into her ongoing personal myth or develop a new one, you will witness an image of hope. Often the emergence or discovery of a new myth brings new energy and meaning into her life.

Let me use as an example a somewhat depressed male directee who discovered that his old myth of a torch-bearing Olympic runner was no longer at work in his life. It had given him energy for over thirty years of his life. As it evaporated, life became less meaningful and a dark cloud seemed to hover over his spirit. Then one day he began to reflect on the idea of personal myth and wondered what his myth was. First he realized that he had been governed by the image of an Olympic runner. He even remembered how he was struck years ago by a brochure with the picture of an Olympic runner. With his spiritual director, he discussed how this image had been at the back of his mind all these years and how, both positively and negatively, he was influenced by this image in his work.

Over several months, he prayed for enlightenment. He reflected on the fact that he was losing his physical energy and that he was getting older. He realized people came to talk with him and discovered in the process that their own struggles were legitimized. One day after several months, a new myth began to emerge in his consciousness:

An old man with a long white beard lives by himself in a simple cabin, five miles outside the city limits. There is a brook with clear running water outside the cabin. Each day the old man goes to the brook to fetch water for bathing and drinking. There is no food in the house. Often people drop in unannounced from the city. They bring food. As they eat with the old man, he encourages a conversation about life. When they leave, they discover that a burden has been lifted.

As this new myth surfaced into the directee's consciousness, the black cloud hovering over him seemed to lift. In the light of this new myth, he regained a symbolic goal. The image or myth gave him a touchstone to make choices that were being presented to him. His relationship with God was revitalized. He accepted the things he couldn't change. He had more courage to change the things he could. Wisdom was born; hope reborn.

Helping a directee to discover her own personal myth is not always as effective nor as simple as I have described. Some directees will need to do a certain amount of inner work before they are ready for this. Other directees will have no idea what you mean when you invite them to discover their myth. You may need simply to invite them to discover the one or two images that have influenced their lives. Sometimes an image alone will carry the same effectiveness. For one directee, the image of a sunflower which follows the movement of the sun became a meaningful way of regarding life's complexities; for another, it was the image of a firefly that became a carrier of how to hold one's heart; for another, the image of a travelling troubadour became the carrier of a life-choice. Images are the language of the psyche which reveal the Spirit dwelling in the soul.

Some material for your study, reflection, discussion

1. In what ways are images the language of the psyche; in what ways do they reveal the Spirit dwelling in the soul?
2. In what ways must we continually "de-mythologize" and "re-mythologize" our personal myths during the transitions of life?

3. How have the Exercises helped you to "de-mythologize" and "re-mythologize" your own personal myths? How has the technique of Gospel Contemplation helped this process?

Endnotes

1. Referred to as Moors by Ignatius in his autobiography, the Muslims invaded Spain from North Africa.

2. This is why, in the 'points' of the Contemplation to Gain Love, Ignatius puts the levels of creation in a particular order. The whole prayer exercise is cast according to a hierarchical order. *This order was not simply a hierarchical order of logic, but rather, it was one that had to do with the nature of things. It was an order of being and of inclusivity:* the vegetable kingdom contains everything in the rock kingdom and goes beyond it; the animal kingdom contains everything in both the vegetable and the rock kingdoms and goes beyond them; the human kingdom contains everything in the animal, vegetable and inanimate kingdoms and goes beyond them; etc.

3. Several decades later, in the play *Macbeth*, with the murder of Duncan, Shakespeare dramatized his understanding of the effects that sin has on this order in the cosmos. This is similar to Ignatius' image of disorder as described in the Second Exercise of the First Week [59], [60].

4. William A. Barry, S.J., *Finding God In All Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1991). Chapter 5, "God's Dream for Our World," pp.66-76. This is a good, easy-to-read explanation of the Kingdom Exercises as myth and is very helpful in explaining the role of the Kingdom Exercise in relationship to the Second Week. Barry deals with the use of the Kingdom Exercise from the classic model which encourages the directee to enter into Ignatius' myth of the King.

5. Some myths are quite conscious. We name them "ideologies." When an ideology no longer has positive power over us, it is time to renew our personal myths.

6. We Jesuit **spiritual directors** and commentators need to be wary when we deal with this exercise. The paradigm that it represents is so much a part of our own collective, Jesuit myth that it is difficult for us to appreciate the difficulties directees may experience with this exercise.

7. The original myth was given to me by a directee for purposes of illustration for others. I have adapted it slightly here.