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Personal Experiences of the Exercises: Leaning In

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Lean In fever swept through the University of San Francisco last year. Sheryl Sandberg's book seduced me. I bought it on impulse at the airport and could not put it down. I stared at the cover in awe of her beauty, her brilliance, her smile (not to mention the hair, makeup, outfit – the picture of effortless perfection). I wanted to be her. Not necessarily the COO of Facebook, but successful, fearless, relentless, clear, strong. And, yes, I wanted her hair.

The book not only seduced me; it affected my mood. What would I do if I were not afraid, I asked myself. Alarming, my answers were a bit extreme. How am I a victim of the “confidence gap,” I asked myself. Am I leaning into my career sufficiently? Am I ambitious enough? Successful enough? Is my husband an equal partner? What should I do as a Catholic woman to be a stronger leader, to bring more women to the table? I was stirred up.

At the same time, I was reading *The Ignatian Adventure* by Kevin O'Brien, S.J., in which he writes that rather than asking, “What should I do? What do I want?” we might ask, “What is God's desire for me and our world? How is God inviting me to a more meaningful, more joyful life?” He suggests that God's desires for us and our deepest desires are one and the same. These words stirred me in a different, deeper way.

My spiritual director describes prayer as “leaning in to God.” So borrowing Sheryl Sandberg's title and my spiritual director's advice, I began to explore how Ignatian spirituality offers an additional pathway for women to lean in.

Accompanying a faculty colleague through the 19th-annotation program this past year, I was struck by how the

Leaning In

By Julia Dowd



Exercises are a training program for leaning into God completely and fully. For many, the Exercises are a yearlong test in doing less. How impossible it can seem for the overextended faculty or staff member to take time every day for prayer when there is pressure to publish, 24/7 email, high stakes decisions to make daily, plus complex parenting and household responsibilities. I learned with my directee how difficult it is for successful women to do less, to say no, and still feel worthy.

The tensions that Sheryl Sandberg brings to light are real, particularly for women in Jesuit Catholic universities. Sharing our experiences as women can be particularly intimidating when uni-

versity hierarchies and clerical privilege coincide. Women are indeed socialized to be silent, to comply, to be Superwomen. Yet is it possible to imagine that God's desires and our deepest desires as women are one and the same? Can the Exercises be a tool for all of us – women and men – to uncover passageways to partnership beyond our imaginations and current realities?

At a few key moments in my life, prayer has felt like jumping off a cliff into an abyss. It takes all the courage I have to imagine myself free falling into God's hands, to trust fully in God's presence. In that brief moment, I get a glimpse of the interior freedom that complete trust and faith offer. Richard Rohr, O.F.M., describes this as “letting go and falling into the part of you that is Love.” It is what Ignatius describes in the Suscipe prayer.

Paradoxically, it has been in those moments of radical trust and surrender in God when I have found strength I never knew I had. I figure out how to solve a complicated problem at work, I find the courage to have a difficult conversation or I complete a project that I never thought I could. Through the Exercises, I have gradually learned how to live, work, and speak with greater honesty, integrity, and occasionally fearlessness.

Sheryl Sandberg described her motivation for writing her book: “I tried to be authentic and shared my truth.” I am grateful that she did. And I am grateful the Spiritual Exercises offer women another invitation to lean in, share our truth, and know our worth. ■

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