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Encounters with Spirited Exercise

The Eloquent Education of the Mind and Heart

By Cinthia Gannett

DAY 1. As I sit with a fine-tipped blue pen and coffee at the local cafe, feeling the quiet solidity of the table and the simple pleasure of soft leaf-patterned bench, I begin my exercise. It is a time of circling in to find focus and meaning, to suit myself to the writing/thinking task at hand – a time that invites me to the fullness of ideas not yet present. It requires patience; it requires sorting through the natural vivid cacophony of the mind. I must discover how to address the topic of my relation to Ignatian pedagogy, which derives from the Spiritual Exercises. In the spirit of those Exercises, I shuttle recursively from reflection, to experience, to action and back again, letting those various encounters shape and reshape the form of this essay.

DAY 2. I write from innocence as much as experience, as Blake might put it. But that experience matters, I think. *Experience and exercise.* Because, as I understand them, the Spiritual Exercises of Loyola and the Jesuits do not constitute a closed or static type of experience but rather a host of flexible exercises or activities intended to open the whole person to the grace of the world and one's own agency in living an informed, mindful, and compassionate life. For non-Jesuits and non-Catholics, it is this expansive, educational process that can be fostered in what is termed "Ignatian pedagogy."

DAY 3. My educational encounters with the Spiritual Exercises are several, though like most faculty and staff I have not undertaken a full retreat. I encounter them regularly, albeit tacitly, in the kinds of Ignatian pedagogical practices sponsored at my university. I have read about the role and place of the Exercises often in histories of Jesuit education. They have become an ongoing locus of scholarly interest as part of the multiyear research on our forthcoming collection, *Traditions of Eloquence: The Jesuits and Modern Rhetorical Studies*. (Gannett and Brereton, Fordham University Press, 2015.)

DAY 4. To get a deeper feel for how the Spiritual Exercises work spiritually in a single eloquent instance, I recently read Paul Mariani's memoir, *Thirty Days: On Retreat with the Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Indeed, I have committed to doing them at Fairfield this fall – to engage in deeper discernment as a teacher, scholar, and whole person.

DAY 5. My life and work is words. I teach courses in rhetoric and composition, grammar and rhetorical pedagogy. Like the early Jesuits and, before them, the classical rhetoricians and philosophers, I am interested in the nature of the human being as *homo symbolicus*, as a species uniquely endowed with the ability to create identities, knowledge, and social relationships through language and to take action (to inquire, to make decisions, to resolve disputes, to hurt or heal) through language. So it is natural

that my way toward the educative work of Spiritual Exercises is through their action as communication, through the work of speaking and listening, through the complex dialogic experience of meaning-making itself, which ties us to ourselves, to others, and to the universe of named and not-yet-named ideas and understandings. The Spiritual Exercises as I have experienced them are a form of attunement of the world and the word/Word – the inner and outer conversations that connect learning, knowing, being on the continuum of *rhetorica humana* and *rhetorica divina*.

I am not alone. Many who work most closely with the Spiritual Exercises use these metaphors of "communication," "conversation," "colloquy" and "dialogue" to explain what they are and how they work. They observe how these complex communicative processes work to instruct, delight, and inspire. These are, not coincidentally, the primary aims of rhetoric. Some Jesuit scholars place rhetoric – all the "ministries of the word" and the actions they entail – as centering the Jesuit enterprise collectively.

DAY 6. Manresa and Montserrat. Years ago, when I was teaching at Loyola University in Baltimore, I was able to do the Ignatian pilgrimage with colleagues from several Jesuit colleges. We read the Spiritual Exercises and O'Malley's *The First Jesuits* in preparation for the trip. But it was only when we arrived at Montserrat and Manresa that they began to have meaning for me. Not Catholic and only vaguely attached to formal Christianity, being in these extraordinary places, even for just a

In method, reflection is dialectical, putting multiple perspectives into play with each other in order to produce insight.

Kathleen Blake Yancey,
Reflection in the Writing Classroom

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few days, took me into the moment of the Exercises in a profound and embodied way.

The remote, high, austere rocky paths of Montserrat and the dark cool sacred space of the abbey, perched at the edge of the precipice, touched some deep dim chord in all of us. The crisp clear air, the tiny mountain flowers that line the ancient trails, the magnificent valleys below, by their very composition of place, encourage reflection on the place of humans in a much larger cosmos. It is easy to imagine Loyola looking out from that high holy place and imagining what God must see, even as he could see himself also as simple pilgrim, tiny in the scale of things.

At Manresa, chapels and buildings now stand in his honor, but the cavern is still a primitive holy place, where one is transported into the scene of the warrior turned seeker, and the murmur of prayer, petition, and meditation surrounds all. A faint echo of the original Exercises lives in that stone cell where Loyola was being educated by this special inner dialogue with God and writing notes on these lessons – what would become the Spiritual Exercises.

DAY 7. The Spiritual Exercises, Ignatian Pedagogy, and *Eloquentia Perfecta*

For several years, I have been studying the history of Jesuit education, focusing on one of its cornerstones, the aim of *eloquentia perfecta*, and exploring ways to reanimate that aim for the current highly rhetorical age. The rich rhetorical education in the humanities and the liberal arts, which included “erudition,” knowledge domains we now see as disciplines, has prepared students of every social status to participate in informed civil and productive ways in the scholarly, social, and public conversations for centuries. This Jesuit commitment to “the Ministries of the Word” (O’Malley 91) resulted in a distinctive and dynamic set of traditions that integrated the spiritual, intellectual, and civic uses of language.

For me, what distinguishes Jesuit education with its aim of *eloquentia perfecta* from other enduring similar educational projects is the potential for this integration of mind and heart through spirited exercise. It uses the classical notion of “the good person speaking well for the common good,” the intellectual rigor of argumentation, and the inner-directed dialogic activities of the Spiritual Exercises reframed as Ignatian pedagogy. This rich integrative process of reflection, educative experience, and civic action is also vitally aligned with current educational theory. As composition-rhetoric scholar Kathleen Blake Yancey explains, “When we reflect, we call upon the cognitive, the affective, the intuitive, putting these into play with each other ...” (6).

DAY 8. Since well before I came into contact with Jesuit education, I have studied journaling traditions, the kind of reflective practices which share a kinship with Loyola’s Exercises and Ignatian pedagogy. Loyola kept a journal during his extended



The view from the mountains at Montserrat.

Photo by Cinthia Gannett

discernment process and revised his notes on the Exercises many times, so he clearly saw the value of this kind of writing. Journals offer a special discursive space to move into the moment of stillness (not necessarily silence) to name, weigh, and work through the deep task of listening to some wiser inner/other voices and of coming to know one’s self through this kind of regular, recorded dialogue. Many journals treat daily and important life choices, writing to learn, healing from great sorrow, caring for the conscience, and cultivating joy and appreciation for life’s gifts. The spiritual journal tradition charts the quandaries and courses of individual spiritual journeys. The acts of mind, heart, and spirit are joined through regular reflection in what Virginia Woolf calls the journal – “a capacious hold-all.” The regular reflective writing I invite my students to engage in enacts a powerful form of learning in keeping with Ignatian pedagogy.

DAY 9. The practice of joining rhetoric and reflection centers my teaching philosophy and practice. In first year writing and reading courses, for example, students read and write about Ignatian pedagogy and *eloquentia perfecta* in order to engage with the Jesuit educational mission directly. They undertake frequent reflective activities to consider their own intellectual and personal paths, and they formally examine the nature of the rich and extensive Jesuit core curriculum to actively synthesize their learning across classes and disciplines. They learn to rely on each other and collaborate, seeing knowledge as a kind of social good, not just a personal good. They undertake research projects to foster their intellectual curiosities and also explicitly contribute to “the common good.”

Students present in a variety of media and public fora, hosting the national day on writing, generating public blogs, creating multi-artifactual portfolios, participating in university colloquia – in sum, exercising their developing voices to speak up and speak out into the larger communities they will inhabit. As a rhetorician and writing program director, I enact an Ignatian pedagogy as I foster *eloquentia perfecta* – studying language and rhetoric in all its forms is a means of coming to know one’s self, others, the world, and the Word and to be able to take action accordingly. ■