

Being Rooted, Being Attentive. COVENANT MOMENTS

Introduction:

The Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Life is Attention. St. Ignatius's Exercises has a principle and foundation. It basically asks us: what are we attentive to, and how are we attentive to it. What we are attentive to reveals what we value, and so it reveals where we put our life.

Attention -- the way intention becomes incarnate. The incarnation occurs through attention. Attention being both 1. a focus and 2. a waiting on.

Basically we intend God. We are incomplete within ourselves. This is experienced as desire. But desire goes beyond feeling. Feeling is only the sensible range of that larger horizon of consciousness called desire. Desire intends to be satisfied. We seek that satisfaction of completeness by having a life giving relationship with the Creator. As St. Augustine of Hippo points out at the very beginning of His Confessions, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." In this he echoes St. Paul to the Romans 8:23.

Attention is a journey.

When we start to become aware of our attentiveness we embark on a spiritual journey in which we wait for God, and we wait on God. Techniques cannot bring God to us. His attending us is a gift. As one Buddhist said: enlightenment is an accident, but techniques make us accident prone. As each level of attention is addressed, and consolidated in our consciousness, it opens us out to deeper and broader aspects of our being in relationship to God. This journey never ends because as creatures we cannot comprehend the infinity of the Creator. As God's beloved we never reach the limits of God's love.

Attention as relationship

There are many ways of depicting this journey into relationship. But it is important to note that the journey goes two ways. As we attend to God, God also attends to us. God presents God's self to us in different ways as we journey into that life. Incarnation, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, The Second Coming, Recapitulation, are six radically different ways of God's self-presence to us in this journey of relationship. On the human side we could look at stages of faith and spiritual development. We could read Fowler or Erik Erikson. We could even read the mystics, such as Theresa of Avila's Interior Castle, on their spiritual journeys.

The development of attention

I have chosen the Ox-herding pictures of Buddhism to explore the some stages of attentiveness in the spiritual journey. I have chosen these pictures because it seems to me that Buddhism explores the nature of human consciousness as relationship without

attaching itself to specific religious dogma. Each stage of attentiveness when it has become appropriated opens out to a newer form of awareness. The letting go of the habits of older forms of attention and the acceptance of those newer forms can often be disturbing and take a long time to be accepted.

Attention as a form of rootedness

Oddly enough these ever newer forms of attentiveness while they root us ever deeper into more comprehensive forms of relationship, often uproot us from the familiar and the habitual and cast us ever more deeply into the world of mystery and into the stance of wonder. A brief example from Kierkegaard might be helpful here. There is a significant shift in awareness from the aesthetic person to the ethical person. The first seeks a life of pleasure and sensuality; the second lives a life of conformity to social norms. It is commonly called growing up after sowing one's wild oats. But then there is the third level of awareness belonging to the knight of faith who, like Abraham, is asked to go beyond all the values of his culture, and sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham's relationship with God carries him to a level of attentiveness that seems, at best, absurd to the world he lives in. But it is only when he shows with the offering of his very life his commitment to his relationship with God that he becomes the knight of faith. Because of that rite of passage Abraham now has a relationship with the future of Israel that was not his before. But note the radical uprooting of all Abraham has known and believe in which leads him to his new sense of self.

We find this same pattern of rootedness/uprootedness in the spiritual journey of Moses. He flees into the desert abandoning his life of privilege and it there he encounters God in the burning bush. Jesus, as the new Moses, gives up his life to enter resurrection. Jesus' followers do the same. Paul is converted. Francis of Assisi, Theresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola all endured illness which took them from their previous lives to a new way of being in the world.

What I am suggesting is that for the spiritual director, and actually for anyone, consciously on the spiritual path, attentiveness is the principle and foundation which provides the rootedness for one's ministry, one's identity, one's stance in the world.

Intentionality

Hopefully what this presentation will allow you to do is to become attentive to your forms of attending to yourself, others, the world, and to the mystery we call God.

The Ten Oxherding Pictures

Illustrations are by Tomikichiro Tokuriki, famous modern woodblock artist from Kyoto.

Poems by 12th century Chinese master, Kakuan.

Translation by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps, as presented in **Zen Flesh, Zen Bones**.

1. Attention as longing

We are God's desire, and we desire God. Nothing or noone else ever fully satisfies that desire. One comes to spiritual direction because one is driven by desire. This longing is felt as frustration at the way things are. It can be read as psychological -- I want to be a better person. It can be read as social -- I want the world to be a better place. It can be read as ecological -- I want there to be harmony among all levels of creation. All of these are expressions of the spiritual. The spiritual takes these up and goes even further. I want there to be right relations between creature and Creator. The spiritual director is one driven by desire. Even the spiritual director operating as such experiences desire as sense of wonder. It asks the question: What is the path of the person I am committed to travel with? How can I dispose myself to help this person? And so we all experience desire as longing, as question. And so we ask ourselves: what is the right question? That question leads us on a quest where we are lead by desire, and so start to become attentive to the desire that is not satisfied. No matter what we do.

What stops us from living fully our desire? There is first the confusion of desires. We are a brood of conflicting desires. All call to be satisfied. As we start our journey we experiment with our desires. I sometimes think that the good spiritual director is the one who has made all the mistakes. The mistakes come from experimenting; but the greater mistake is not to experiment for then one never discovers one's true relationship with God. Those mistakes we discover as we experiment are very useful for they give us the basis of discernment. Ignatius of Loyola uses his experience on his sickbed recovering from knee operations to discover which desires lead to God and which lead to transient pleasures. It is his experiments at Manresa that led to his rules for discernment. Moses had first his own desert experience and it is this which serves as a basis for leading the Israelites through their own desert experience after they crossed the Red Sea.

What we learn from our experiments is the limits of our known world. That limited, and limiting, perspective offers its own interpretations of what an encounter with God should be like. We get them from the lives of the saints and holy people, or from heroes of myths in different traditions. The difficulty is that while those interpretations may be valid and stimulate us, they do not touch the depths of our own being. They belong to another person. As we become more attentive to our own longing we also become aware of the fears that try to stop us from following the path of our deepest desires. We start to see how we are conditioned by fear. How it drains us of our creative energies. But our deepest desire to be in right relationship with God --and like Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven"-- will not let us be satisfied with anything less. So we set out past our fears.

1. The search for the bull

In the pasture of this world, I endlessly push aside the tall grasses in
search of the bull.

Following unnamed rivers, lost upon the interpenetrating paths of distant
mountains,

My strength failing and my vitality exhausted, I cannot find the bull.

I only hear the locusts chirping through the forest at night.



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Questions for reflection:

1. What were the dissatisfactions which led you to begin your spiritual quest?
2. What were the fears you faced? How did you face them?
3. What happened when you started to face your fears , and the power they had over you?

4. Attention as testing

We are now in unknown territory. Even though we have made an important shift in our awareness we still bring with us the habits of a lifetime and the conditioned perspectives and responses of the cultures we live in. It is rather like being in a city by day and now being in the same city at night. Our attentiveness to what is around us and inside us becomes sharpened. We start to be aware of things that had not been noticed before. Some of these may be paths to the divine. Some may not. We explore those paths because they touch something in us. They might be an answer to the need that drives us. We might read of saints or holy people in different traditions who seem to be living the life we seek. We look for people who might share the same interests. We look for a spiritual director ourselves to help us find what we are looking for.

What we are doing here is sifting our desires. We follow them all and learn from our experiences. Some desires bring pleasure but not life. Others do just the opposite. We explore different traditions of spirituality or of life to see if any one of them offers a path we want to follow. We know that what we seek may not necessarily be defined by society as religious, or even holy. We seek a love that will touch us intimately and deeply and totally. It may be with another, or in a community, or even in solitude. What we are looking for is a vocation that will weave together the different aspects of our lives. Our interior and exterior life; our private and our public life.

In this testing we discover traces of what we are looking for. In everything we do we find ourselves asking the question: does this carry me closer to that goal, whatever it is? We also discover that things happen to us which in retrospect show that God is also seeking us through our encounters with the world. For me, the chance reading of Thomas Merton's *The Sign of Jonas*, because I felt guilty about playing bridge during a sixth form prefect's retreat was such a moment. Reading that book then I experienced a flood of peace I had never experienced before. I realized that night that that peace was what I deeply wanted. Years later re-reading the same text left me unmoved

2. Discovering the footprints

Along the riverbank under the trees, I discover footprints!
Even under the fragrant grass I see his prints.
Deep in remote mountains they are found.
These traces no more can be hidden than one's nose, looking
heavenward.



Questions for reflection:

1. What were the significant experiences that focused your quest in a particular direction?
2. How did they clarify the path of desire? Negatively? Positively?

-- discernment /experiment/ the going beyond borders

attention as glimpsing

On some of those paths we experience moments of consolation, awareness, connectedness, meaning, direction, peace. Those moments show us that what we are looking for is possible. The question is how to hold onto that momentary feeling of intimacy. The ways of our present life then do not enable us to live that deep sense of connection. The peace I experienced reading Merton as a Trappist seemed beyond my reach. I was not a Catholic then, I was a chatterbox for whom silence was an impossibility; I could not sing, and a life of vegetarianism was totally foreign to me. Those glimpses revealed an intimate reality that is elusive and they engender in us a frustration because we have tastes of what we desire but do not have the skills or the discipline or the disposition to maintain that state of awareness. However those moments are so powerful as to confirm our suspicions that there is something there and for me. In fact we use those experiences, and the memories of those experiences, as a touchstone to judge what is important to us or not. They give us a way of moving towards what we desire. We try to find for ourselves something that resonates on an intuitive level with the feeling we had during that experience. We hold onto it and pursue the path it opens.

If in the second stage of attentiveness we are given a wrapped present, in this third stage we are like children at Christmas opening that present. We rip the paper wrapping. We see the box containing the gift. We open the box. There inside waiting to be ours is our heart's desire.

But seeing something and being able to use it are two different things. The prisoner incarcerated for a long time does not simply step into freedom. The process of justice, through the legal system, still has to be brought into operation before he can be freed. And even though the system might get him out of prison he is still not free. He carries the world of the prison within him. But looking through the bars of his cell window, facing outwards, he glimpses the world of possibility now available to him. He hopes to achieve what he sees.

The one on the spiritual path at this level of attention is led by hope. One knows intellectually that an intimacy with God is already given but that intimacy is not realized in one's habitual life. One knows it but does not feel it. We know God is holding us but we do not experience being held. What we experience, rather, is a sense of separation

from God and a sense of alienation from life. We do not see our life as patterned by God; we just see the scribbles of daily living. The concept of the awareness of God as the ground of our being, or another way of putting it, the awareness of God as holding us has not become a realized insight.

3. Perceiving the bull

I hear the song of the nightingale.
The sun is warm, the wind is mild, willows are green along the shore,
Here no bull can hide!
What artist can draw that massive head, those majestic horns?



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-- resonance

4. attention as finding

It is at this stage that we find ourselves in a crisis because the path that opens to us challenges us. We have to change our life, the things we do, the people we associate with, how we view ourselves and others. We are called to a commitment that involves great risk. It feels as if our very life is out of balance and we do not have the conditions to change it. Yet we know we must change if we are to live the life that calls to us beyond our disorders. We must make a huge existential leap to a decision which seems like folly to ourselves and to the world. Kierkegaard talks about this state in *Fear and Trembling* when he discusses Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. We risk our very lives, our future, the respect of others. We hand ourselves over to the unknown.

This is rather like selling all one has in order to buy the pearl of great price. But our willingness, at great cost -- costing as Eliot said, "no less than everything" -- to do this disposes ourselves to be found by the Mystery who is also seeking us. It might seem easy to talk about this but the actual process is quite difficult. In the radical vulnerability of standing stripped of everything -- maybe this is one way of looking at the dark night of the senses that John of the Cross talks about -- we present ourselves as disposed to being found by God. One leans into a darkness and in that stance of attention becomes aware of all the demons within one and around one which are attracted to this level of vulnerability and become more openly manifest in one's daily life.

The level of attentiveness here occurs at a broader level than our mere conscious willing. We dispose ourselves to being found, even when aspects of ourselves are still caught up in security and comfort and find this larger movement of ourselves a trial. But we endure and wait in that darkness. This emptying out of ourselves by that deepest desire we are for God of all that stops us from finding God leaves the open space in which we are found by God. When that happens we start discovering we have "religious experiences" of intense natures and they stand in contrast to the daily lives we lead. These religious experiences are of extreme consolation and desolation.

I think that it is only in retrospect, years after, that we understand that in both those consolations and desolations we are held by God. The consolations occur when what is spiritually healthy opens us further to God's self-giving; the desolations occur when we experience the blocks in our awareness to accepting that self-giving. Then we experience ourselves as being in forms of hell or purgatory.

4. Catching the bull

I seize him with a terrific struggle.
His great will and power are inexhaustible.
He charges to the high plateau far above the cloud-mists,
Or in an impenetrable ravine he stands.



Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you remember significant religious experience that you might have had? When you look back at them can you see how they have shaped the way you now are?
2. Do you recall the arid times that came before those experiences? How did you experience those arid times?

attention as commitment
-- tuning

The process of allowing the diverse patterns of our desires to become attuned to what has been present to us in those dramatic religious experiences takes years. Our attention -- the way we look at and experience life, ourselves, others, even our relationship with the Mystery we call God -- is being transformed. We have the experience of being found. This is not a once and for all experience. The separated aspects of ourselves, our unintegrated energies that manifest themselves in forms of desire, piece by slow piece are sought out and woven into a new and emerging self. Slowly over the years we find ourselves becoming attuned to that mysterious Other who has desired and called us. We find ourselves in a constant state of tension between our separated desires and the desire of God.

St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises had a consideration of something he calls The Two Standards. In each of our lives we are caught in the tension between the Standard of Satan and the Standard of Christ. This tension never leaves our lives. But as we live attentive to the spiritual path and to the passion which roots us we discover ways of identifying those calls which occur at every moment of our lives and of coping with our narcissisms and our desires for self-transcendence.

This requires aseciticism. And agere contra. The enemy of our human nature seeks to take away from us the fullness of life and the path that would lead to the fullness of life. In his rules for the discernment of spirits Ignatius says that "the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal, moral. Where he finds the defenses of eternal salvation weakest and most deficient, there he attacks and takes us by storm" (Sp.Ex 327:14) The theological virtues are faith, hope and charity; the cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance; the moral or eschatological virtues are gratitude, humility, vigilance, serenity, joy.

I mention this because often -- and this has been my experience -- we do not ask ourselves what must we do to counteract those temptations against these virtues. It is hard work to develop these virtues, and hard work to eliminate the forces in our lives and around us that erode these virtues. Even more difficult is the psychological identification of ourselves with our feelings. When we treat spirituality as psychology we ignore the broader dimensions of our being creatures in a contemporary world. Helpful here is the Examination of Consciousness. In this discipline we allow our gratitude to show us how our day has been. Allowing gratitude to show us where we have been in tune and where we have not been in tune refines our attunement. It is better to allow gratitude to do this rather than using our intellects, or our "conscience" because the latter two often carry us to places of idealisation, self-flagellation, and duty.

Remaining in gratitude not only shows us our day clearly, it also reveals to us appropriate means of asceticism to become more deeply rooted in attention. To approach this attunement otherwise focuses on perfectionism, and forms of self-will to

improve one's condition. Then we unwittingly succumb to Michael Serres' observation that disorder favours certain forms of order.

At this stage of attentiveness when we become aware of the habitual patterns engrained in ourselves that prevent us from a domestic familiarity with the divine, we can clear away some of the dust that clouds our vision. But some of what clouds our vision also shapes the way we see and we cannot of ourselves do anything about that. What has to be done has to be given. All we can do is dispose ourselves to that gift and to live out of it. We can allow it to re-shape our sense of presence to ourselves and others and to the world slowly and often in secret.

5. Taming the bull

The whip and rope are necessary.
Else he might stray off down some dusty road.
Being well trained, he becomes naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.



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Questions for Reflection:

1. When we look at the virtues, which ones are we most diminished in?
2. What asceticisms do we practice to build up those virtues?
3. How do those asceticisms bring us to a deeper and more joyful rootedness in God?

Attention as habit.

But as we lean always into the darkness which calls us beyond ourselves we fall into the habits of love, fostered by the examen, fostered by the daily practices of prayer, spiritual reading, care for ourselves and others. We no longer suffer the dramatic ups and downs of beginners walking a spiritual path. It is not that life becomes easier; it is that we are becoming seasoned as practitioners of a particular spiritual path. This does not make other spiritual paths and traditions irrelevant. In fact what we discover as we become attentive to our own spiritual path and discover it existentially we start to become aware just how other spiritual traditions and practices can supplement it.

Attentiveness as habit leads to an openness which seeks to develop one's relationship with God without restricting that relationship to the biases of one's cultural conditioning. If the previous state of attention deepens us, this present state broadens us.

Our perception normally is focused within a limited range of attention. As we cultivate our attention that range of attention broadens. We start discovering the presence of God's life not just in certain things --as in our prayer, liturgies, spiritual reading. Our being attuned at the depths make us aware of aspects of the world around us also manifesting God's life. The boundaries between the sacred and the secular become more blurred. We start to find God in more and more things, and this is because we seek to discover the way God is present in all things.

The Roman poet, Terence wrote that nothing human is foreign to him. When we start living our attention as habit we discover the same thing. I think what we start discovering is the dimensions of being human. The path of becoming fully human , beyond our fears, or socialised self-interest makes us interested in the world outside us as aspects of ourselves. As we become aware that we are connected to all of humanity and creation, or that all of creation is in relationship with us we start to allow the habit of attention to lead us in our lives. We have the sense of coming home to ourselves, beyond alienation or shame or self-justification. We find ourselves being able to sit more comfortably with the saint and the prostitute, the creative and the corrupt with a sense of wonder and simplicity. We discover our kinship with the created.

6. Riding the bull home

Mounting the bull, slowly I return homeward.
The voice of my flute intones through the evening.
Measuring with hand-beats the pulsating harmony, I direct the endless
rhythm.
Whoever hears this melody will join me.



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Questions for reflection:

1. Where do we find ourselves being called specifically to develop our intimacy with God?
2. What do we do to develop our rootedness?
3. How is our perspective -- our ways of imagining the world -- becoming more broad and inclusive?

attention as complacency/neglect

As we become accustomed to living the path as mystery, and in our growing awareness of our kinship with everything, we become aware that we are looked after, held in God's love, surrounded by the powers of good and so we slowly stop worrying about whether one is doing God's will or not. The awareness of the omnipresent mercy of God transcends the anxieties that might arise whether one is doing the right thing or not.

This deeper state of attentiveness allows us to be more intuitively in contact with God. We know at this stage that even if we make mistakes --though our care for the world stops us from being silly or imprudent -- the basic concern of the Father is transform all our mistakes into occasions for new life. We recall here that God saved us even when we were sinners and saves us even as we sin. This does not give us the license to sin (pace 007). But it does give us the freedom to trust ourselves in God and to be creative. We can do this because there is a felt sense of a constant presence of the relationship. It is like the artist who has perfected his technique so that when he picks up his brush every stroke is a revelation. He no longer worries about what to do. He lets the brush speak and he trusts what it does.

You might notice sometimes in spiritual direction that it comes to you to say something and you do and it is the right thing to say. You do not know where that impulse comes from and what is its effect, but there is a rightness to it. That sensibility has its root in this stage of attentiveness when we do something spontaneously because it seems right. We go to the library and a book draws our attention to it; or we speak to a person we have no reason to speak to except this urge suggests itself to us.

What is operating here is the awareness of a level of dynamic relationships that constantly exists among all creatures beyond the ego's consciousness of those relationships. It is as if we start seeing when we stop forcing ourselves to see. Rather like those Jackson Pollock scribbles that seem like nonsense; but when we let our eyes fall out of focus, three dimensional figures emerge from the seeming chaos. We become aware that we are an intrinsic part of that living organism which manifests itself through relationships and we entrust ourselves to it.

Lest we attach a false sense of importance to this and ignore its ordinariness, we might consider the difference between when we first started driving a car and now. After years of driving our instincts are honed and we do not think of being the driver when we drive. The driving is done through us.

7. The bull transcended

Astride the bull, I reach home.
I am serene. The bull too can rest.
The dawn has come. In blissful repose,
Within my thatched dwelling I have abandoned the whip and rope.



Questions for prayer and reflection.

1. Can we list the things we are so competent at that we forget ourselves doing them?
2. Can we recall moments when we have given direction and became surprised at what we said or did?
3. Can you remember a time when someone for direction came back to you surprised and ecstatic at a passage you gave them for prayer and it was not the passage you actually gave them?
4. What happens when you just sit in the presence of God's love?

attention as empty.

But entrusting ourselves to that sense of presence we are still aware of ourselves, and it is only in developing the habit of living out of that trust that we slowly abandon the self-consciousness which, strangely enough, has brought us to this awareness of relationship. The previous state might be compared to a person who realizes that he is not separated from anything in contact with him. There is no self and other; there is just the awareness of oneness. This present state is different. There is not even the awareness of oneness. There is just emptiness. At the level of greatest importance -- that intrinsic sense of self-- one has the sense of being in free fall. One is not sure if one is rising or falling; one is not sure of direction. All co-ordinates, at this level, are gone.

One one level this is quite liberating; on another level it causes great anxiety because there are now no longer any co-ordinates to say where one is, or how one is. Kierkegaard once defined anxiety as the dizzying experience of freedom and at first the experience of emptiness does create anxiety because one wants desperately to know where one belongs and how. Living out of that emptiness erodes the remnants of the sense of self that seeks such assurances. The final state is now not just a particular set of connections that is relationship. Now there is no relationship because there are no connections. In Buddhism there are a set of aphorisms the third of which might be applicable here.

Vision is mind.

Mind is empty.

Emptiness is clear light.

Clear light is union.

Union is great bliss.

The realized experience of emptiness is one of clarity. To try to construct the relationship between things is complicated. It is complicated because a relationship is read in terms of structure, context, conceptual thinking, cultural perspectives, levels of intentionality and response. Relationships are operative within a historical framework, of time and place. But more real and stable and rooted than those relationships is their basis which is the felt experience of emptiness that allows the excess of over-determination, and the mutability of such determinations seen as specific contexts. What does this mean? It means that identity defined in terms of relationships cannot be totally and fully expressed through concepts. As Sartre points out: existence precedes essence.

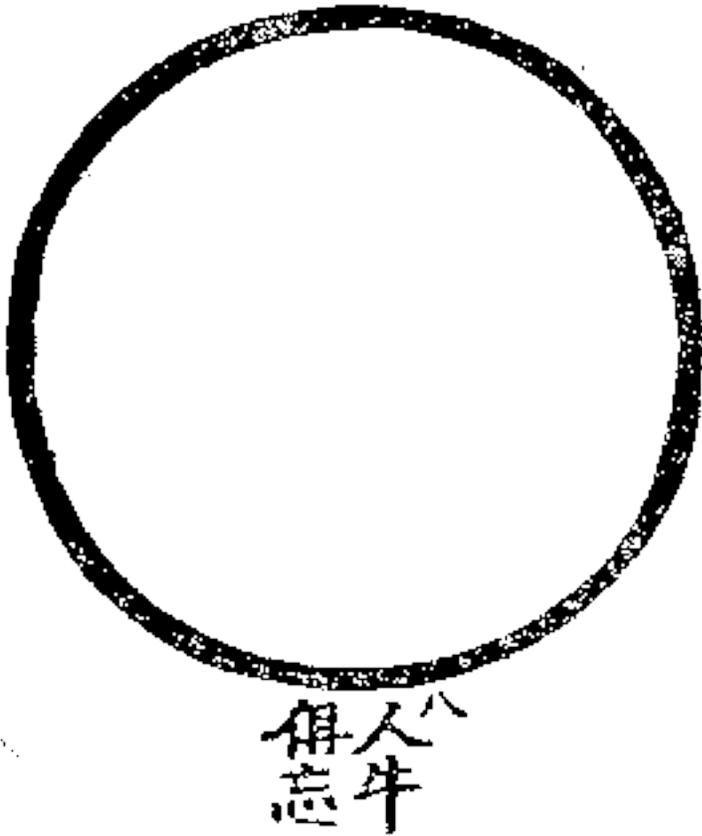
How is this to be read in a traditional Christian context? Emptiness is the state that exists beyond any human narrative. A Christian approach is to see the journey into emptiness as the journey of the Christian into the Third Week of the Ignatian Exercises when one contemplates the passion and death of the Christ. In his suffering and death the Christ moves beyond those social and cultural narratives which give his life earthly significance. He is rendered bereft and abjected. That stripping away leaves only one

relationship intact. It is the one the Father has with him. It is in the light of this relationship that other relationships are seen and valued . We should observe that on the Cross the relationship Jesus has with the Father is different from the relationship the Father has with him. On the cross Jesus says: Abba, abba, why have you forsaken me. He existentially feels an abandonment of his prime relationship. But his Abba enters the human Christ very human death and brings that emptied awareness to a new level of humanity called resurrection.

For us as spiritual directors the sense of emptiness allows us to see the relative value of all relationships , their contingency and their impermanent nature. One has the sense that there is nothing one can hold onto. Awareness at this stage is functional because relationships at this stage are functional. This is a very powerful state of attentiveness for the spiritual director to be in, as he is not swayed --or caught, or interested --- in anything. He is like the warrior cutting through the knots of illusion. He can only offer then what he himself endures.

8. both bull and self transcended

Whip, rope, person, and bull -- all merge in No-Thing.
This heaven is so vast no message can stain it.
How may a snowflake exist in a raging fire?
Here are the footprints of the patriarchs.



Questions for Prayer and Reflection:

1. When you look back on your life what were the times you felt stripped? How did that state affect your spiritual direction?
2. How does your emptiness allow you to remain in another's space without imposing your own agenda?
3. Even as directors we can be constantly tempted to "fill our emptiness". What are the ways in which we are tempted and what are the ways in which we maintain our emptiness?

Attention as Source:

The clarity that emptiness allows shows us things as they are... i.e. the coming together and the dissolution of relationships that would define a thing in a specific context. Things just are. The awareness of impermanence gives us the freedom to delight in things as they come and go. In fact it is this very coming and going is symbolic of emptiness. The Heart Sutra of Buddhism states: form is empty; emptiness is form. Concretely we can see some of the forces that make us “read” a thing in a certain manner. We realize that that reading is conditioned, and that we ourselves are conditioned, and so we do not accept our insights, and interpretations, and judgements as absolute. We are not committed to our interpretations which would exclude other interpretations. So our biases do not blind us from the sense of wonder and mystery that a thing shows forth and the sense of its ordinariness. We come to a state in life when we do not have to argue a point, defend a position, indulge in binary oppositions. As T.S. Eliot says in Four Quartets:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

This is the perspective of the little boy in the fairy tale, The Emperor’s New Clothes. He sees things as they are. Ignatian indifference is one manifestation of this rootedness. Such indifference is not apathy but actually a passionate focus of one attention to life from the perspective of the Christ who talks, in John’s gospel of his one-ness with the Father (John 10:30).

There are times in the life of the spiritual director, and especially in direction, when he says things and is surprised at what comes out of his mouth. Where did that come from, he wonders. This occurs because at that moment the director is operating out of his rootedness and that life which he symbolizes at that speaks through him.

The state of the director at this level of spiritual awareness is one who does not have to maintain dogmatically an ideology, or a particular tradition. Attentiveness comes out of a sense of being rooted, and one’s perceptions of reality arises from that rootedness.

There is a great deal of energy to be saved by being rooted and by living that rootedness in one’s life. We become like water. We can adapt to situations without losing our integrity. Out of that sense of life lived through our life emerges a sense of gratitude, wisdom, wonder, a delight at the many different displays of life, a compassion for those not so aware and for those who suffer and cause others to suffer because of that lack of awareness.

We note that this is not a return to a position of naivete, but rather an acceptance of a state of innocence, and of child like wonder that the Buddhists call “novice mind.” Picasso says it takes a long time to learn to paint like a child. It takes a

long time as an adult to achieve the perspective of spiritual child. And as Jesus says, " Unless you become like a little child you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

The little child does not live out of pre-conceptions. There is a sense of immediacy with a child. Adult life, on the other hand, is vastly mediated. The spiritual journey deconstructs those mediations. The spiritual director is one who facilitates that deconstruction so that we are not caught up in false stories but allows us to see things as they are. That we are creatures, that we are the beloved of the Father; and that we are held in the Father' s love. We return to the source when we can live consciously at all levels of our being (so not just intellectually or emotionally) in that love. The spiritual journey of a director carries those on their own path to a place where people and things and the possibilities inherent in these at this particular time are seen clearly and simply. Thus we serve those who come to us not because of duty or our sense of the profession but because we see in everyone whom we accept for direction the life in them that cries out to be lived . It is a life in conscious union with the Father.

9. Reaching the source

Too many steps have been taken returning to the root and the source.

Better to have been blind and deaf from the beginning!

Dwelling in one's true abode, unconcerned with that without --

The river flows tranquilly on and the flowers are red.



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Questions for Prayer and reflection:

1. How do we live our Ignatian indifference?
2. How do we daily experience life as a Mystery?
3. What happens when we sit in, or allow ourselves to be embraced by, Mystery?
4. How does it shape the way we see the world when we are attentive that way?

Attention in the World

The training of a spiritual director never ends. He is on a spiritual journey that moves into the fullness of life. It is a journey into the Trinity. That journey never ends. We as creatures will never exhaust the depths of the love that is the Creator. It is our fidelity to that journey, and our call to help others on that journey, which allows us to be most authentically ourselves. Living out of that rootedness in one's life, is a prophetic witness. That witness does not call attention to itself but rather calls forth a level of attention from those one encounters which enables them to become more truly themselves. We do this because we realize that we are one body. We are the body of Christ, and that body gathers up to the Mystery we call the Father all that exists. The awareness of our identity not as individuals but as community calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and to place that loving within the context of loving God with all our heart and all our soul, with all of who we are. Our fullness of identity is as creation in relationship to the Creator. The realization of that relationship carries us on the spiritual journey which has brought us to this moment. It is a journey into freedom, where freedom is understood as an authentic relationship with God. That authenticity manifests itself in indifference -- not as apathy, or ignorance --but as a passionate attention in God to a service of the world.

The freedom of living indifferent allows others to experience freedom which I would define, not as the ability to do as the ego likes, but as living in right relationship with God.. Then there is such a deep level of self acceptance and trust in divine providence that one lives out of a sense of gratitude and joy for all that is given and with a sense of play which allows for creativity and the passing on of the spirit. One is aware of one's radical sense of creaturehood, and aware that that creaturehood is beloved by God. As the first beatitude of Matthew's gospel puts it: Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of God. As we journey into love we become more and more aware of our poverty. But it is precisely in living out of this poverty that the energies of God are allowed expression. Then we become even more transparently living words of the Father. The service we render to the world is in and through joy. It is joy, and joy alone which transforms the world.

10. In the world

Barefooted and naked of breast, I mingle with the people of the world.
My clothes are ragged and dust-laden, and I am ever blissful.
I use no magic to extend my life;
Now, before me, the dead trees become alive.



Questions for Prayer and Reflection:

1. How do we experience our call to be spiritual directors now?
2. Where do we find ourselves on the journey as mapped out in the Ox-herding pictures?
3. How do we experience our relationship with the world?

4. Where have we discovered we have given life to others? What does it feel to sit in the gratitude of being of service?
5. Where is our joy? Why do we at times give away our joy? How do we regain our joy?

Below is a short story from W.S. Merwin. I would like to use it as a way of getting in touch with the Mystery that holds us, calls us, and missions us. I offer this simple question: What in the story touches you and why?

Tergvinder's Stone

W. S. Merwin

One time my friend Tergvinder brought a large round boulder into his living room. He rolled it up the steps with the help of some two-by-fours, and when he got it out into the middle of the room, where some people have coffee tables (though he had never had one there himself) he left it. He said that was where it belonged.

It is really a plain-looking stone. Not as large as Plymouth Rock by a great deal, but then it does not have all the claims of a big shaky promotion campaign to support. That was one of the things Tergvinder said about it. He made no claims at all for it, he said. It was other people who called it Tergvinder's Stone. All he said was that according to him it belonged there.

His dog took to peeing on it, which created a problem (Tergvinder had not moved the carpet before he got the stone to where he said it belonged). Their tomcat took to squirting it too. His wife fell over it quite often at first and it did not help their already strained marriage. Tergvinder said there was nothing to be done about it. It was in the order of things. That was a phrase he seldom employed, and never when he conceived that there was any room left for doubt.

He confided in me that he often woke in the middle of the night, troubled by the ancient, nameless ills of the planet, and got up quietly not to wake his wife, and walked through the house naked, without turning on any lights. He said that at such times he found himself listening, listening, aware of how some shapes in the darkness emitted low sounds like breathing, as they never did by day. He said he had become aware of a hole in the darkness in the middle of the living room, and out of that hole a breathing, a mournful dissatisfied sound of an absence waiting for what belonged to it, for something it had never seen and could not conceive of, but without which it could not rest. It was a sound, Tergvinder said, that touched him with fellow-feeling, and he had undertaken - oh, without saying anything to anybody - to assuage, if he could, that wordless longing that seemed always on the verge of despair. How to do it was another matter, and for months he had circled the problem, night and day, without apparently coming any closer to a solution. Then one day he had seen the stone. It had been there all the time at the bottom of his drive, he said, and he had never really seen it. Never

recognized it for what it was. The nearer to the house he had got it, the more certain he had become. The stone had rolled into its present place like a lost loved one falling into arms that has long ached for it.

Tergvinder says that now on nights when he walks through the dark house he comes and stands in the living room doorway and listens to the peace in the middle of the floor. He knows its size, its weight, the touch of it, something of what is thought of it. He knows that it is peace. As he listens, some hint of that peace touched him too. Often, after a while, he steps down into the living room and goes and kneels beside the stone and they converse for hours in silence - a silence broken only by the sound of his own breathing.