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Abstract

Contemporary experience has been radically altered by the technological and commercial influences that dominate our daily lives. Technology speeds up and broadens our access to vast amounts of facts and information. However, this modern landscape of information, facts and entertainment has slowly eroded the narrative fabric of our culture that helps us identify and differentiate the qualities and meaning of ourselves as unique individuals. Disillusionment arises as we witness the impersonal developments of science, technology and commercialism that expand far beyond our capacity to understand and value their utility. More and more, we find ourselves following their lead and defaulting to false desires and to a spectator consciousness. In this article, we will address the fact that our modern scientific materialism conceals within it an "agnostic reflex" which, in orienting us to the thinking head can foster a hardening of the heart. This same evolution has forgotten the necessity of experiencing the heart as an organ of perception. Knowing the heart as an organ of perception reacquaints us with the vital and sacred experiences of desire, feeling and imagination as the narrative building blocks for a way through the disillusionment of self-estrangement in an ever more mechanical universe.

It is not truth that rules the world but illusions.

Soren Kierkegaard

Though we live much of our lives outside, in action and engagement with the world, the deeper impact of what happens is registered in the narrative of the heart.

John O'Donohue

Many, today, sense that a thick feeling of disillusionment hangs over our communities, our economic affairs, our political discourse, and our ecological environment. The daily news is, more often than not, a series of disturbing revelations regarding the thoughtless or disreputable practices of a large corporation, a governmental agency, a political party or candidate, a minster or priest, or the news organization itself whose very voice you are listening to in order to grasp a sense of the world's events. We hardly need to be reminded of the unsettling tragedies and misfortunes that haunt the edges of our awareness – oil leaking into the Gulf of Mexico, political talk shows spilling polarizing rage into the airways, readily accessible pornographic images, tedious volumes of abstract information and puerile conversation filling the Internet, and random, senseless mass shootings in public places. We are at once discouraged by these developments and at the same time turn away from them. Faced with their frightening enormity and pernicious persistence, we quietly struggle with our own feelings of impotence, fear and resignation. More dangerously, we may begin to sense a thick cloud of disillusionment blanketing our hearts.[1]

These curious expansions of business, media, and technological influence have raised powerful, vast questions for us. What is the intent of all this activity, what values or virtues are they serving, and who is driving these forces on? What future are they leading us toward? It is these vacuous, pokerfaced questions that cast the dark shadow of disillusionment over our hearts. As a psychotherapist, I have the opportunity to hear what this disillusionment sounds like on a more personal level. How could they fire me after I had given them so many good years of service? How is it that I feel so powerless, anxious and tired all the time? How could my father, spouse or religious leader betray me like this? What has happened that I have lost my faith in God, in others, and in myself? These questions, like the more social and environmental questions above, resonate in a dark unresponsive vacuum. In disillusionment, we find ourselves alone, hearts broken, minds reeling, with no illusions to comfort us and no trustworthy voices to speak to us.

The Manipulation of Desire

To say, in disillusionment, that we have no trustworthy voices to speak to us, is to recognize that we face a world that often fails to address to our heart's longing and desire. The Irish author John O'Donohue describes this contemporary landscape as one deliberately designed to manipulate our desire:

> Our consumerist culture thrives on the awakening and manipulation of desire. This is how advertising works. It stirs our desire and then cleverly directs it toward products. Advertising is the schooling of false desire and relies on our need to belong, to play a central part in society and not exist merely on the fringes of it. And because awakened desire is full of immediacy, it wants gratification and does not want to be slowed down or wait. It wants no distance to open between it and the object of desire; it wants it now. This manipulation of desire accounts for the saturation of our culture with products that we don't need but are made to feel we do. There is no end to this false desire. Like the consumption of fast food, it merely deepens and extends the hunger. It satisfies nothing in the end.[2]

Political and commercial advertising now has the power to present us with collective, distorted images of anorexic beauty, counterfeit love, muscular health and excessive financial well-being. Twitter, Facebook or Email make seductive promises to alleviate our social alienation and loneliness. Hundreds of cable channels delude us into imagining that we are actively engaged in the world when in fact we are becoming merely passive spectators. It appears that we are inundated with images that promise much, but fail to orient us.

As Donohue suggests, these technological images betray their superficiality and thinness because, fundamentally, they fail to satisfy us. To the contrary, they deepen our hunger, alienate and disorient us. In contrast to the images of longing that naturally arise from our heart's desire, we could describe this hyper-technological landscape as creating "simulated" images which over the last century have slowly cultivated the sense that we now live in a simulated world.[3]

Our simulated world has come into being as the offspring of over a hundred years of industrialization and technological development. We rarely consider that psychotherapy itself is only one hundred years old and that it came into being as a response to humanity's growing alienation from the natural world that O'Donohue refers to as the hunger of false desire. Freud, in fact, first referred to himself, not as a psychiatrist, but as an "alienist."

One of the more destructive and disillusioning aspects of our progression into scientific materialism has been that this simulated world of technological and commercial images, made up of facts and information, has slowly eroded the narrative fabric of our culture. Traditions of knowledge are passed down from generation to generation through facts and information, but the traditions of wisdom

require a living memory of and a fidelity to the mysterious images which come to us through story, fable, parable, myth and scripture. These images move and educate the heart, protecting us from the false desire and the simulated imagination of advertising. At the turn of the 19th century, at the same time that Freud was witnessing our growing alienation, Walter Benjamin, a literary critic and writer of children's stories, made the observation that this increase in information and decline of story consciousness was leading to nothing less than the loss of our ability to "see" and comprehend our own experience:

> More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: *the ability to exchange experiences*. One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low…Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; *almost everything benefits information.*[4]

We might say that as we have become evermore indoctrinated by centuries of rational, scientific binary thought, we have lost our awareness of the heart as an organ of perception. Part of our great collective disillusionment, seen so clearly in our vast, vacuous questions and disappointments, is that we have become identified and marooned within the mind, its conceptualizations and its neurology. We stand as if in a vast desert of anxiety and doubt. The theologian, Henry Corbin, describes this contemporary predicament and condition of consciousness as having developed an "agnostic reflex."[5] This agnostic reflex involves an immediate, egotistical, mental abstraction of our experience that separates and isolates our consciousness from its object – the separation of thought from the living qualities of being. Our life experience presents itself to us in mysterious, provocative ways – as being enchanted, being depressed, being in love, being in grief, being at home, being bored or being rational. We always find ourselves being supported by these diverse conditions of our own being. However, our agnostic reflex, nurtured by scientific logic and critical thinking, can turn us away from the deep, soulful invitations of these meaningful ways of being. Merely being rational may "abstract" us from other complex currents and images of what it means to be spiritual human beings.

Educational Praxis:
As educators, do you witness a growing sense of disillusionment in your students? Students are bombarded by an increasing amount of stimulation and have an overwhelming access to information that tends to foster fragmentation, standardization and compartmentalization in one's academic life.
In our attempts to be "values-based" as Jesuit educators, what do you imagine helps to "center" or ground a learner's values and protect them from the anxiety of contemporary fragmentation?
In what concrete and experiential ways do you find that you are able to assist learners in developing a sense of value, heart or soul for what calls them toward a vocation?

The Heart's Perspective

So what would it mean for us to once again develop a sense of the heart as an organ of perception?[6] The lesson that our powerful contemporary disillusionment teaches us is a curious one. At the hands of our technical, scientific training, we have come to associate illusion with falseness or distortions of reality. However, dis-illusionment does not mean we are tricked by distortions and illusions, rather it means we are "deprived" or robbed of our illusions. Illusions, as Kierkegaard suggests in the introductory quote, are a way ***into*** the world. Illusions are the very substance of fiction, memory and story creation…and they

are necessary to recovering the heart's desire and the heart as an organ of perception.

Fantasy and illusion are the modes of perception that allow us entrance into the mystery of things and beings, human or divine. Illusion comes from the root word, *ludere*, to play. In contrast to our dominant materialistic view, which sees things and beings as objects, perception is a mixing of the inner mystery of our own being with the being and qualities of the world. This is a subtle, imaginative engagement that builds capacities over time – like learning to play music, learning a language, playing sports, dancing, practicing one's art or trusting the rhythm of love. In *The Art of Inquiry*, Coppin and Nelson remind us of this child-like aptitude:

> People individuate by moving toward what presents itself as *other* in their lives in much the same way children, guided only by their eagerness to explore what they have never encountered, discover their delight in the things of the world. This kind of play is a commitment of time as well as emotion, intellect, sensation, and imagination.[7]

As we know in any conversation, perception is the play of how words, images and gestures both reveal and, at the same time, conceal qualities, meanings and intention. Parables and stories conceal their meanings, just as readily as they reveal their secrets. We may have to wait years before we are prepared to see their significance. The "whole" usually escapes us, but we are "in the game", we sense a mood, an image, have a fantasy or an illusion which informs us, through the heart, that we are close to the mystery of an experience. When we perceive through our heart, we know that the heart is not merely a pump and that the world is not a dense, materialistic boundary or a construction of atoms. Rather we sense that the things of the world, in fact, have in interiority and this interiority is a threshold to invisible realities and possibilities.

From the perspective of the heart, the world reveals that it has much in common with the dramatic make-up of our dreams and that it is constantly prepared to surprise us if we can but see through its dark mirror. James Hillman reminds us in *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World* that the reflections of the heart are physiognomic and gestural and tied to our deepest longings and desires. To perceive, the heart must imagine. It must see shapes, forms, faces – angels, daimones, creatures of every sort in things of any kind; thereby the heart's thought, just like the playfulness of dreams, personifies, ensouls, and animates the world.[8]

Without the play of images, fantasy and illusion, our hearts and its desires are dis-illusioned. We have forgotten that the link between the heart and our organs of sense – touch, hearing, taste, warmth, smell, vision - and the shining world is not one of simple mechanical sensationalism or physiology. Rather, it is aesthetic. As art teaches us, everything we know and feel and every statement we make is all fantasy based, that is, they arise from psychic images. These images and shadows of the heart are not merely the flotsam of memory or the reproduction of visual perceptions. Rather as C. G. Jung taught us, fantasy images need to be taken in the poetic sense, considering images to be the basic givens of psychic life, self-originating, inventive, spontaneous, complete, and organized in archetypal patterns. Fantasy images are both the raw materials and the finished products of the psyche. As meditative thought and prayer makes us aware, images are the privileged mode of access to knowledge of the soul. Nothing is more primary. Every notion in our minds, each perception of the world and sensation in ourselves must go through a psychic organization in order to "happen" at all. Every single feeling or observation occurs as a psychic event by first forming a fantasy-image.[9]

One might still be quite suspicious of this praise of fantasy and illusion. Are not illusions, fantasies and deception the very by-products and distortions of our modern world? Again, in contrast to living fantasy, the simulated images from our consumer

culture are dead and "already finished." That is why they fail to satisfy. In being merely entertaining, they fail to resonant with the deeper rhythms of the heart. They are images that have been given to us artificially. Rather than entering and resonating with the silent perceptiveness of the heart, simulated images increase our internal noise, distract our attention, cultivate dissatisfaction, self-estrangement and disillusionment and usher us onto the path of stress, ADD, burnout and a host of modern dis-eases.

When we speak of the heart's capacity to resonate, we are already sensing its return as an organ of perception. For this resonance - its movement, its capacity to "break," bleed, expand, contract, whisper, sink, sing, or leap for joy – are all descriptions that allow us to see that, unlike the head, the heart is an organ that is capable of sensing rhythm and the qualities of temporality. The heart perceives the movement of time. In the imaginative landscape of the heart's feelings, "time" moves through us in the most necessary and meaningful of ways. This is how we sense what we "value."

One can easily imagine that the heart is shaped like a musical instrument with resounding chambers that allow us to discern what moves us. We recognize and differentiate the presence of anxiety, depression, grief, intimacy or hope by their e-motion, their rhythm and tempo. There are stories, "once upon a ***time***" waiting for us to listen into in the vibrating movement of the heart's feeling. Depression invites us back into the past, intimacy ushers in the living presence of the world and hope brings into focus the possibilities of the future. We are beings in the ebb and flow of time and eternity. We only come to know ourselves when we sense how our stories fit into the larger rhythm of history and culture.

Reading the World Anew

If disillusionment feels hopeless, it is, in fact, reflecting our experience of losing this imaginative capacity to sense the movement of time, the meaning of the past, the familiarity of the present or the promise of the future. With political and commercial media presented as simulated images and education presented as an accumulation of facts and information, we experience the trauma of a dead reproduction and our sense of time is truncated to an empty, ravagingly hungry and uniform present. Once this narrowing and deadening of time numbs us, we are thrown back upon the existential commotion of our lonely inner life.

Educational Praxis:
Ignatian pedagogy is frequently guided by Lonergan's critical method that explores the building blocks of consciousness - Experiencing, Understanding, Judging and Deciding. This experiential method was Lonergan's attempt to be faithful to the deep, varied, meaningful possibilities of "lived experience," for example, the way truth and value reveal themselves through "experiencing," feeling, dreaming, prayer, play and the rich ground of diverse ways of being in the world.

How do you, as an educator, perceive the value of these diverse ways of experiencing and integrate them into the learning process?

How do you sense that the dominant contemporary methods of natural science shape or influence our access to "lived" experience?

Recently, I was presented with a situation that reflected this very dilemma. I had been seeing a fifteen-year-old girl in counseling for a couple of months. She came to one session in distress over having lost her iPhone. As she began to describe her despair, I realized that she was speaking as if she had misplaced her heart. In fact, she wore her iPhone like a necklace, hanging close to her chest. She wept that all her music, all the songs and rhythms she cared about, had been secretly collected in that metal box. She claimed that she wasn't sure she could feel alive and real without these familiar melodies, voices and images that reminded her of who she was and what she cared about. Without these touching tunes, she worried that an encroaching anxiety or loneliness might consume her. Even as she described her predicament, she clutched her chest where her absent iPhone had once been at the heart of

her life. All the movement she so dearly wished to hear, had been collected in a small technological device and now she was left to listened to the noisy intonation her own experience which seemed to arise out of an empty heart.

In the presence of living images and fantasies arising from desire, the resonance of the heart announces itself within the silence of the body. The silence that surrounds the images and fantasies that arise out of our heart's desire often have a numinous quality that, in its warm, dream-like currents, introduces us to a stillness. This stillness is an invitation to a conversation that has the quality of prayer. In the silence surrounding our desires and feeling, we can hear the echoes of the invisible forces that have brought our very being into existence in the first place. We sense that our inner life of desire, impulse and feeling is bigger than we are. We glimpse that our desires and feelings, although they initiate us into the dark depth and complex breadth of life, are, in fact, gifts and presences that must be acknowledged with reverence and gratitude. Ann and Barry Ulanov refer to this resonate silence where we first encounter the movements of the soul as our "primary speech;" the awareness that in the heart-felt silence of these primal images and fantasies, we are not only being brought to awareness, we are also being spoken to.[10]

Sensing the very movement of our desire as a form of primary speech, prayer or conversation with spiritual presences delays our agnostic reflex from being immediately seduced onto the couch of disillusionment. A reverence for these sparks and murmurs of life reminds us that this is one of the ways that the divine moves through us and reveals itself to us. When, in our disillusionment, we find no illusions to comfort us and no trustworthy voices speaking to us, we must remember that our own elemental experience is already a "primary speech" in which our hearts are always engaged. In the Ulanovs' words, this primary speech is where we know we are never alone. We are merely students of our own being and of God's grace:

> Desire leads each of us to begin praying from the premise of being, of who we are. What will sooner or later become our discipline in prayer starts in discipleship. We are students of being as we experience it. We notice what our own way is. We give our central attention to what we are saying and what we are already speaking for others to hear in our actions, words and feelings. We can see the primary way in which we already are speaking to God and God is speaking to us. Prayer is taking notice of that speaking back and forth and joining our voice to it consciously.[11]

Our bodies are deeply, unconsciously immersed and engaged in the wisdom of the world. This wisdom appears at those thresholds where the human and the divine converse. It is at these points of convergence that fantasy, illusion and enchantment are born and sustain our heart's capacity to see. However, often in contemporary discourse, agnostic minds and hardened hearts conceal these thresholds. We are now at a time that we must learn to read and hear our world anew, recognizing that the soul makes its home in the numinous images concealed in our moods and desires. Let us pray that we learn to do so, soon. HJE

Notes

[1] A modified version of this article previously appeared in *Human Development*, Volume 31.

[2] John O'Donohue, *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings* (London: Bantam Press, 2007), 43.

[3] This devolution toward a "simulated" world has been articulated in the work of Robert Sardello, *Love and the Soul: Creating a Future for Earth* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books) who offers a vision of how the capacities of reason, imagination, and memory can be developed to once again sense that the world of nature and things is alive and ensouled.

[4] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 85.

[5] Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or The Imaginary and the Imaginal," *Spring Journal* (1972): 4.

[6] *Love and Soul: Creating a Future for Earth,* p. 278. This perspective that the heart has "perceptual capacities" has

been a familiar theme in the work of many literary, psychological and philosophical writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, John Keats, Henry Corbin, Rudolf Steiner and Robert Sardello. These thinkers have wrestled to imagine a more holistic methodology and way of knowing that does not split the mind from the heart or thinking from feeling, but rather acknowledges their necessary, experiential engagement in perception.

[7] Joseph Coppin and Elizabeth Nelson, *The Art of Inquiry: A Depth Psychological Perspective* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2005), 147.

[8] James Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1981), 46.

[9] James Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 23.

[10] Anne and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982).

[11] *Ibid.*, 17.

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