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A Spiritual Direction Approach Aimed at Creating Belonging on Campus

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Abstract

Creating a campus culture of belonging is mission critical for Jesuit institutions. This is even more heightened with the recent Supreme Court decision eliminating affirmative action and numerous states restricting the teaching of history especially around race. To overcome these setbacks and the larger negative effects of racism and white privilege, many of our schools offer trainings, book discussions, and dialogues. These have been very helpful.

Yet, another untapped dimension to racism and white privilege occurs at a spiritual level. Mission officers, DEI officers, rectors of Jesuit communities, and spiritual directors can collaborate to engage this level of the issue. The spiritual dimension is a failure to see and live out of the understanding that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. This article offers a specific approach to spiritual direction that engages the issues of race and white privilege through a three-phased movement. Participants come to know they are deeply loved, then explore their unredeemed history especially around racism and white privilege, and finally encounter God's healing mercy. Consequently, individual relationships and eventually structures of relations that create a campus culture begin to be characterized by welcome and belonging.

Introduction

I am a paradox. On the one hand, I am a white man which, in our culture, brings tremendous power and privilege. Yet, on the other hand, I am nearly blind. This is a place of great vulnerability and powerlessness. This paradox offers me a unique perspective on life and growth potential contained in the tension of paradox.

My vision loss has provided me a pathway to explore these areas more deeply. Through my own inner journey, I needed to face my fears of blindness, grieve the loss of much of my eyesight, grapple with my feelings of being invisible and marginalized, and unearth the ways I had internalized the beliefs and biases of the sighted community. This process was at times painful and heart-breaking. In the end, I feel some of its fruits are compassion and a greater capacity to be present to those different than me and those suffering. As a result of my own inner journey around blindness, I became more attuned and sensitive to others' experiences of being marginalized, excluded, and invisible. For me, this centered around the topics of racism and white privilege. Exploring my own male identity and

whiteness was another inner journey. Learning about these issues, my own complacency, benefits, and cooperation was also a painful and still ongoing process. Recognizing my own blind spots on these issues was challenging and ultimately a source of hope.

Another perspective I have comes from being a spiritual director for over 18 years. Understanding the richness of Ignatian spirituality, giving the Spiritual Exercises, and walking with over a hundred diverse people during this time has offered a wealth of experiences of how the inner journey is deepened and developed.

Drawing upon these unique perspectives, this article offers a particular type of spiritual direction that our Jesuit institutions can employ to enhance our campus climates. This approach is needed more than ever, and our institutional leadership can play a major part in it happening. In the recent U.S. Supreme Court case, *Students for Fair Admission, Inc. vs. President & Fellows of Harvard College* and the similar case against University of North Carolina, the high court struck down affirmative action policies used for admissions.¹ Other state legislators have followed suit, banning

affirmative action efforts, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and restricting the teaching of history as it relates to race and misrepresentations of critical race theory. In the most positive light, the intentions of such actions may be seen as aiming at fairness, yet the impact such decisions offer is one of exclusion. In these challenging times, leadership needs to lean into their mission statements and the wealth of the Ignatian heritage to formulate a new response. Mission officers, DEI officers, rectors of Jesuit communities, and spiritual directors can come together and find another way to create belonging on campus. This group can lead by engaging in the outlined form of spiritual direction and encourage others of the campus community to do the same. Such an engagement creates a change of heart and a capacious compassion towards people that are different from ourselves. This unique approach offers our institutions great promise in addressing the issues of racism and white privilege. Spiritual direction changes both the lives of individuals and supports structures that transform campus cultures.

Approaching the Situation of Racism and White Privilege

Racism and white privilege have greatly shaped the landscape of U.S. history, our religious institutions, and most definitely the reality of higher education. Many of our Jesuit schools have initiatives to improve DEI on campus. Through various offices, some at cabinet-level positions, employees and our students are offered a variety of events and initiatives to actualize DEI goals. The various trainings, book discussions, and conversation groups are all valuable ways of changing the culture of our institutions. In these venues, we often reflect on racism and white privilege in terms of economic and educational barriers, wealth accumulation, equal access, and legal developments. These efforts have made tremendous strides in enhancing the climate on our campuses for the better.

In addition to these programmatic responses, I want to suggest there is a spiritual cause of racism and white privilege and hence an untapped area for campus renewal.² I call it spiritual blindness or blind spots. It comes from a failure to see clearly who we are and whose we are. The roots of

racism and white privilege can be found at the deepest level of our identity. All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, Genesis 1:26-27a. These are irrevocable. This fundamental truth affirms the value and dignity of each person. Our identity is one bearing the image of God. For some people, they fail to fully see themselves this way due to feelings of unworthiness, shame, and personal failings. They are unable to see themselves as God sees them. Furthermore, this inability to fully recognize this identity translates into actions that are less than the actions God offers. In expressing that identity each of us is called to demonstrate the same care, compassion, concern, mercy, acceptance, and welcome that God does. Yet, for some, this is not entirely possible.

Racism and white privilege are attitudes and actions that fail to recognize this inherent dignity of the other. White privilege, especially as it relates to white supremacy, holds onto the notion that being white is normative and the benchmark upon which all is measured. Those who are white receive special benefits while those who are not, are restricted. Consequently, people of color are treated in unjust ways, overlooked, excluded, and denied access to many of the most basic things that white people expect are normal. These actions reflect a failure to truly see and act accordingly to the divine image present in the other. This is a major blind spot in the spiritual realm of life.

Spiritual Direction: Drawing on the Ignatian Heritage

Spiritual direction with its close connection to retreat ministry has a wealth of untapped resources in which leadership and employees can engage. Spiritual direction has a profound effect in addressing these spiritual blind spots and subsequently enhancing our campus climates. Spiritual direction touches us at the level of the heart and soul. It can make an effective change to this climate by cultivating a growing sense of capacious compassion. Pema Chodron wrote in her book *The Places That Scare You*, "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It is a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion

becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.”³ Spiritual direction offers us an opportunity to allow grace to move us to some of those dark exiled painful places that are buried in our personal history, our unredeemed history. These can range from moments we have failed to love, to our attitudes and actions around racism and white privilege. When God’s compassion and love towards this unredeemed history is recognized at a heart-felt level, we can begin to recognize we are loved, accepted, and forgiven by God even when it seems unwarranted. It is an encounter with the love of God at the depths of our being. It is a process of self-discovery, forgiveness, and healing. It is these heart-breaking experiences of being so loved by God that are needed today in response to our current racially charged and privileged reality. Such instances of God’s compassion can be a healing and restorative moment. Such an experience can help those engaging in this type of spiritual direction (directees) recognize their own inherent dignity that seemed absent in those moments. Consequently, directees will be able to take this expanded sight and notice the inherent dignity in people on campus and places they once overlooked, did not recognize, or thought was absent, especially around people of different races.

Furthermore, as directees gain this spiritual sight to see the dignity of others, it also offers a process for them to understand what is holding them back from fully living in a way where their actions are consistent with this inherent dignity. In a way, directees learn their areas of unfreedom to fully respond to and act in accordance to what they see. This loving process begins to remove these barriers and people find new reserves of energy to live and act on campus and beyond as God acts. God has been actively schooling them in a process of discovery, forgiveness, healing, and self-acceptance, so they in turn can live a similar way. Hence, the directees attitudes and actions are more aligned with the deep identity of being a bearer of God’s image and likeness.

To summarize, as leaders and members of a campus community individually, and eventually collectively, engage in this particular process of spiritual direction, we experience God’s compassion and welcome in our own unredeemed history, especially around racism and white

privilege. We then become more adept at being present to those individuals and peoples we have in the past excluded. Spiritual direction increases our capacity to welcome others because it teaches us to welcome ourselves. Thus, with a greater capacity for engaging with and welcoming difference, can we then begin to build stronger race-relations and engage in the challenging work of building institutions and a society that honors the humanity of all its members.

A Focused Spiritual Direction Process

Spiritual direction offers an approach to pray over one’s experiences and find God in them. To grow this capacity for belonging and being schooled into a welcoming and accepting person, a three-phase movement in spiritual direction is used. The first movement is a growing sense of being loved. The second phase is a growing sense of how we have failed to love likewise. It is a process of entering into our unredeemed history. This phase will also invite directees to be open to what God may desire to reveal to them around their own experiences of race and privilege. And, the third phase is the heart-breaking realization that we are loveable, accepted, and forgiven even in our most unlovable and shameful moments. Even those moments around our attitudes and actions around race and privilege are not beyond the pale of God’s love. We are being welcomed home to ourselves. These movements are like the dynamic operative within the Disposition Days and the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. These movements do not have a fixed time. Rather, they flow one into the other.

Movement One: Being Loved

To know we are deeply and profoundly loved, spiritual direction will focus upon three areas for prayer and reflection. They are gratitude, God’s love, and a sense of God’s on-going creative action. For Ignatius, gratitude is the most fundamental disposition of the heart. It encourages us to see all as gift. With such a view on life, nothing is owed to us. We recognize our dependence upon God. This helps generate a sense of awe and humility. We are moved to awe in that fact that God wants us here, we have life right now. We did not bring ourselves into the world. There were forces greater than ourselves at

work in this process. In a similar way, God sustains the life we have. Our world has the means for life to continue, air, water, food, community. These goods may be diminished in quality due to human freedom (our current climate crisis), yet, they have been created to support and sustain our life.

To better encourage this awareness of gratitude, spiritual directors and directees can begin praying more on all they are grateful for. It may be creating lists of people, events, situations, things we have learned, mentors we have had. We can look across the span of our life and take stock of all we are grateful for. As these reflections deepen, we can slowly become aware of how all these people, moments, talents, experiences are really gifts. A power is at work that is allowing all this to happen. We can then step further back in our prayer and reflection and become aware of how God is the source and giver of these gifts. For Ignatius, God is a generous and lavish giver. Through our reflections, we can have a growing appreciation of all we have as gift.

With this deepening sense of gratitude, a growing awareness of being loved by God also becomes emergent in our hearts. Spiritual directors and directees notice that this Giver gives out of love. For Ignatius, love is shown more in deeds than in words and all the gifts we have received affirm God's deep love. People can enhance these reflections by praying over Psalm 139:1-18. This psalm allows people to notice a God that loves them, knows them, cherishes them, and is with them always. Spiritual directors and their directees can even begin to look across the phases of their life, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, etc. and recognize at a heartfelt level how love was present in their lives and in some mysterious way, God, the source of all love, was also with them. Spiritual directors and directees can take some time and relish this faithful loving presence and allow it to sink even more deeply into their awareness.

As these experiences of gratitude and being loved continue to be absorbed, they open a growing sense of God's on-going work. God, our Creator, continues to create and labor within us moment by moment.⁴ In his *Contemplation to Attain the Love of God* (*SE* 231-237), Ignatius offers four

points about the dynamic quality God has with us. God creates, abides in this creation, labors in this creation, and is the generous giver of gifts in this creation. Spiritual directors can assist their directees to come to know and appreciate this loving and engaged God. We are God's project and labor of love. For example, how God sustained us earlier in our life, is still sustaining us now. Through God's on-going creative work, we are continuing to grow and develop as people. Our understanding and sense of self is expanding. We continue to have graced moments that further form and shape us. The gift of our life began at a particular time and yet, that gift continues to be offered again and again. We are sustained in a moment-by-moment way.

Spiritual directors and directees are encouraged to notice God's on-going laboring in our on-going creation. We continue to be God's project. What God has started is not complete rather a work in progress. For instance, it took billions of years to create a biosphere that could support and sustain human life. A God that knows and loved us in our youth will continue to be present and faithful to us in the winter of our lives. God is still loving, still gifting us, and still finding ways to cherish us. Praying and reflecting on this on-going care and creative work of God is fruitful. It creates an openness and dynamic quality to our lives. It engenders a sense of curiosity to what God may shape within us next. We cultivate a spirit of exploration, discovery, and appreciation for God's on-going labor within us.

These profound experiences of gratitude, being loved, and appreciating how we are God's project, are unique and personal to us. Yet, this loving God loves all in unique and personal ways. It is important for spiritual directors to encourage their directees to come to know how this God also interacts with people who are different from themselves. It is valuable for directees to appreciate the depth and intensity of God's love for others and is not exclusively ours. Rather, it is present to all people and creation. The same loving and gifting God we have come to know through these reflections is acting in similar ways to other people. Directors and directees can deepen this appreciation by reflecting more fully on an adapted version of Antony De Mello's quote. His original quote is, "Behold God

beholding you and smiling.”⁵ Rather than beholding ourselves, we adjust the quote and attend to the other. So, “Behold God beholding someone different than ourselves and smiling.” Directors can encourage directees to bring forward a series of people who are different than the directee. They may be from a different race, cultural background, or other identity markers that may be relevant. This type of gazing prayer allows directees to appreciate how a God truly loves all that bear God’s image. Watching God smiling at these individuals, especially those of different races or those we find difficult, may be challenging. For some directees, this may come naturally. While, for others, this may be uncomfortable and raise feelings of confusion, jealousy, or suspicion. These feelings reveal deeper stories and experiences that will be more fully unearthed in the next movement of this process.

In a similar way, directors can explore with their directees the *image* of the “Beholding God” they are watching. For some directees this *image* may be non-descript such as a loving presence or a warm light. For others, this *image* may be personified. In cases such as these, questions that explore the race, cultural background, or gender of this “Beholding God” image may be fruitful. Directees can discover how they came to this particular image. They can consider the stories that have promoted their image of God. Also, directors can help directees examine how free they are in holding this particular image. As much as God can be understood in a particular way, it is accurate to know that God is more than this particular way and equally *not* seen in this particular way.⁶ Such an exploration can reveal if a directee is holding onto one particular image of God too tightly. The world of art has a wealth of images in which God is represented that span a wide range of race, cultural backgrounds, and gender. Suggesting other images for the directees “Beholding God” may be a fruitful avenue for prayer. Directees move to a greater place of freedom. They are open to allow God to be God and be manifested as God desires to be known. At times, the images of God we have can easily turn into idols and circumscribe God. This can also be an uncomfortable process yet one that can lead to greater inner freedom.

Movement Two: Entering Our Unredeemed History: Exploring Our Lack of Love and Gratitude:

For this phase of the journey, Love is always leading. We can easily begin to rattle off our mistakes, wrongs, people we have hurt. Yet, the process of becoming aware of our lack of love does not come from a self-directed space. Rather, it is God’s love that leads. The more we know how much we are loved and cherish, we slowly notice how small and meager our love is. Spiritual directors and directees faced with the awe and immensity of such lavish love begin to notice the times and moments when our love was lacking. Spiritual directors and directees can then explore those tender places in our lives. As with gratitude, we can look across the span of our lives, the places we have lived, the schools we have attended, the jobs we have had, and become more aware of when our love has been lacking. We notice those embarrassing moments. We allow love to reveal the events and circumstances operative in them. We allow love to take us to the places of shame and ingratitude—what things have we done that are not reflective of who we want to be. We are led to those places that we have sadly wounded others. Spiritual directors and directees move into what is known as unredeemed history. God’s loving light guides the way and illuminates these places within us. Spiritual directors can assure their directees that what comes into the light is what is needed to be healed, forgiven, and loved.

Aspects of our unredeemed history are related to our experiences of race and privilege.⁷ With love leading, spiritual directors can encourage their directees to open themselves to these moments that may be sources of confusion, embarrassment, and shame. We can begin to notice how apathetic our love is around race and privilege. Some questions to hold in our hearts are:

- How often do you consider what your race is?
- In your friend groups, who is and who is not at your table?
- Is there a race you would not want to be? Why or why not?

- What have been some of your experiences and interactions with men, women, and children of the above race you indicated?
- When you have engaged in conversations about race and privilege, how have you responded? (Felt defensive, attacked, angry, or open and willing to engage in these hard conversations?)
- When you have interacted with people of the race you do not want to be, how have you responded to their experiences? (uninterested, denied the reality of their experiences, blame them for their experiences, or listened to them openly without judgement?)

These among other questions may spark your curiosity and further a process of discovery and self-exploration around race and privilege.

It is important to know that God brings whatever moments, memories, stories, and feelings forward to have a more honest, loving look at them. This can be a challenging and painful process. It can be accompanied with many tears, feelings of remorse, anger, and self-loathing. Our own inner critics may be loud and judgmental. Yet, God's love continues to lead and navigate these frightening moments. Spiritual directors can continue to offer reassurance to their directees to trust this unearthing process and know how God is the one leading its unfolding. This movement into our unredeemed history is simply another action of our laboring God. A helpful passage spiritual directors can suggest is Jeremiah 18:1-6. Here we can have the reassurance of always being in God's loving care and even when something is not right, God continues to work it towards the good.

As this process continues to sink us into our unredeemed history, especially around race and privilege, it begins to act like a funnel. Rather than a stick breaking upon us, it is more like a dawn breaking over us. We move past the individual events and become aware of the deeper feelings, beliefs, and values at work. We notice how past hurts and unhealed wounds motivate us to hurt others. We become aware of parts of ourselves we do not like and would rather keep in the shadows. We notice more clearly those painful experiences

we would rather keep hidden and not share with others fearing their rejection of that part.

Some of these moments may be related to how we understand ourselves and people of different races. We spend some time noticing when fear is present in our interactions with people of a different race. We can ponder the values and beliefs our families taught us about different races and privilege. We can notice when we failed to act and were silent in the face of racism and the exertion of white privilege. Again, this may be a painful and tearful process. Yet, spiritual directors can offer the reassurance, that God's love is leading and how this inner movement is yet another act of God's on-going creativity. As difficult as this process can be, God's love is intimately connected to it.

Movement Three: Being Welcomed and Accepted: God's Lavish Laboring Mercy

This unearthing process continues its unfolding and a shift begins to happen. A good example of this shift is seen in the life of Ignatius during his time at Manresa. Ignatius came to know God's love in powerful ways and to experience God as a "helping" God. This type of love offered him the ability to forgive himself, to know that he is worthy of being loved, and to know that God not only forgives him for his failings, missteps, and sins, but that God's love is that unshakeable even when he was failing, making those missteps, and sinning. He experienced in a profound way that God's love was more powerful and accepting of him than he could ever imagine or dream.

This shift may be subtle and not be as dramatic as Ignatius' experience was, and yet spiritual directors can help their directees notice it more as it happens. People slowly realize that God is with them in this journey. It seems like much focus has been on their lives, all that apparently went wrong, and their blind spots around race and privilege. Yet, spiritual directors can help directees notice how God continues to be with them in this journey. God has not shied away from these places. Rather God is bringing them into the light. God knows these places, moments, parts of ourselves we have exiled away and attempting to bring them home. God's lavish love is being

poured out upon these experiences of our unredeemed history.

A helpful scripture passage is Luke 15:17-24. Here, the parent is welcoming home the wayward child, restoring his or her dignity, lavish with gifts of ring, robe, sandals, and feast. We like the Prodigal are being lavished with such love and mercy. Spiritual directors can help their directees notice how God is teaching them to love all aspects of who they are, even the limited parts of ourselves around our attitudes and actions regarding race and privilege. Such an experience of God's love integrates and welcomes home parts of ourselves. No longer alienated and estranged from those parts we dislike and are made uncomfortable by; we can now recognize and accept them as part of who we are. This integrative process helps us feel a sense of being whole or belonging to ourselves.

In a similar way, the passage of the woman weeping at Jesus' feet and washing them with her tears is another powerful passage about forgiveness Luke 7:37-38. Spiritual directors can help their directees move to a deep sense of both contrition for such awareness of being loved when so unlovable and to a powerful sense of gratitude for this next act of laboring love. According to Elizabeth Johnson, mercy is a womb-like experience where the person is being created anew.⁸ Such an experience is part of God's unfolding creation. God supported and sustained the person throughout these unredeemed moments, found ways to bring them into the light for healing and transformation, and was able to reconcile the directee to his or herself. The woman weeping reflects such a moment of deep and transformative gratitude.

To summarize, this threefold approach to spiritual direction brings deep healing, integration, and transformation to directees. The experience of being love, the self-knowledge gained by exploring our unredeemed history (in particular around race and privilege), and the heartbreaking realization of being forgiven and welcomed home is powerful. The cumulative effects of this process allow people to embrace their identity of bearing God's image and likeness more fully and to have their actions reflect the same type of love, healing, welcome, and acceptance God reveals.


Conclusion: Consequences for Campus Climate and Race Relations

As spiritual directors accompany campus community members through these phases of being loved, entering one's unredeemed history, and being welcomed home, a powerful effect happens to community members. People know in their heart of hearts how deeply and profoundly loved they are. This is more than an idea, that God loves me. It is a heartfelt and at times heartbreaking awareness of God's personal love and compassion. We have been schooled in "welcoming" the other that is really us.

As members of our institutions take these lessons to heart, it will affect the racial climate of our campuses. Our employees will have a greater capacity to hear and hold uncomfortable feelings and stories. As they have come to terms with aspects of their own experiences of race and privilege, they will be in a better position to bear witness to others experiences of race and privilege. A spirit of curiosity arising from our own process of discovery will be engendered and a desire to learn more about the others around them. We will be curious to know more about the others background, experiences of the world, and what their experiences have been like around race and privilege. This curiosity and openness to those that are different creates a sense of being wanted by the other. These interactions instill a sense of being seen, known, and an affirmation that their presence matters. Furthermore, as campus members have been able to integrate and welcome home parts of themselves, especially around race and privilege, they will have a greater capacity to integrate and welcome home those that were once perceived as others and strangers on campus. A spirit of acceptance and hospitality become the operative approaches between colleagues.

The effects of spiritual direction of this kind continue to expand past individuals and begin to affect a campus culture. As more members of a campus community engage in this particular process of spiritual direction and learn to welcome home their own estranged selves and subsequently welcome home others, a broader set of relations on campus will be characterized by these behaviors. In these sets of relations, curiosity, openness, acceptance, welcome, and belonging

become the normative patterns and take root on a campus. According to Daly, these sets of relations begin to create a structure of welcome and hospitality.⁹ Hence, a critical mass is then achieved. Our campuses not only will have individuals that live out their inherent dignity by welcoming and integrating all, but also structures where inclusion, welcome, and belonging are promoted on campus. This is where the real

power of this type of spiritual direction happens as its individual effects become amplified and incorporated into the campus climate. It is then that the negative effects of racism and privilege can be minimized. Our institutions would then more fully enact their mission of creating a campus where all feel a sense of welcome and belonging. 

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Supreme Court, “Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. vs President and Fellows of Harvard College,” accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.supremecourt.gov/search.aspx?Search=decision+june+29+2023++harvard+north+caroline+case+affirmative+&type=Site>.

² For a more recent and comprehensive understanding of why racism is a spiritual formation issue, see Diane Chandler, “Spiritual Formation: Race, Racism, and Racial Reconciliation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 13, no. 2 (2020): 156-175.

³ Pema Chodron, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 50.

⁴ A good article that speaks to God’s on-going creation is Joseph Tetlow, S.J., “The Fundamentum: Creation in the Principle and Foundation,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 21 no. 4 (1989): 1-53.

⁵ *Hearts on Fire: Praying with the Jesuits*, ed. Michael Harter, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1993), 9.

⁶ As much as we know God, God is still incomprehensible. A nice article that brings this Thomistic notion forward is Brian Davies, O.P., “Aquinas on What God Is Not,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 52, no. 204:2 (1998): 207-227.

⁷ A solid resource that can offer some suggestions in this unearthing process I personally used and found helpful is Layla Saad, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2020).

⁸ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: A Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 180.

⁹ Daniel Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 75. Daly speaks about how relations can grow and form structures. It is precisely these structures that begin to create wide-spread cultural transformation.