

Rethinking *Magis*

Dr. Trudelle Thomas

I've been invited today to talk about Magis, specifically Magis (pron. MAH jis) in my own life journey. All of you who have been involved in Ignatian Programs know the usual definitions. Magis means "the more" or a "spirit of excellence" or "a generous commitment to quality". Today I plan to focus on how Magis plays out in work.

I have to admit I have mixed feelings about Magis. We live in a time when many of us feel overextended. It's tough to balance the demands of work with a second shift of family responsibilities at home. The new information revolution causes our cell-phones and emails to constantly clamor for attention. And Xavier is also amid great expansion and change that we all must adapt to—to diverse people, to new ways of doing things. (Influx of women into all levels of the university has raised many issues—that will not disappear.) All these needs make me ask why MORE? I already have too much on my plate.

I spent time over spring break praying and thinking about what I could say today. I drove to rural Pennsylvania alone to spend time with my mother who is 77 and lives by herself in the home where I grew up. I was delighted to spend time with her, which included doing housecleaning that she's not able to manage now. I scrubbed the bathroom and cleaned out the refrigerator. My final day at home, my old friend Barb called and mentioned that she was thinking of starting a cleaning service and might be able to help mom out. I'm embarrassed to tell you that my first reaction was "A cleaning service! Surely you have better things to do with your time than clean houses!" Fortunately I didn't actually say any of this. I thanked her and set out for the long drive back to Cincinnati.

Long drives are good for thinking. Still musing over Magis, I thought back on that exchange with Barb. What was the source of that snooty voice in my head? Housecleaning can be tiresome but it's essential to our well being. It has its own dignity. Surely cleaning isn't beneath *any* human being—though my fifteen year old son thinks it is.

Still thinking about Magis, I recalled all the hard work I'd done to become a professor at Xavier. After high school I worked my way through ten years of college and graduate school, always striving for straight As--then another fifteen years earning tenure and moving up the ranks as a professor. All the while I was being graded, and grading other people. Endless hours spent grading student papers, evaluating job applicants, evaluating other professors, evaluating others' research. Grading and ranking became second nature. Striving to improve--and to help others improve--can be very satisfying, BUT can also become an enormous stress.

Living in the shadow of a huge measuring stick is wearisome. It can make you perfectionistic, or over-critical, or rushed. A person can feel she's never doing enough. That measuring stick can also creep into your personal life, so that you begin to judge things you have no business judging. Unchecked, the measuring stick can actually undermine the true spirit of excellence. It can create what economist Sylvia Hewlett calls a "lesser life"—a narrow, joyless life.

I certainly had no business putting down Barb's offer of housecleaning! As I continued my drive, the thought came to me that my friend Barb herself is an embodiment of Magis, of excellence. She's been a dear friend since first grade, and still lives in the same zip code where we both grew up. She married soon after high school and raised three children. Since they've been grown, she's had several different jobs and now has a clerical position in a community mental health clinic. She's had heartaches, including a son with alcohol problems. But she also has a deep spirituality, formed mostly by involvement in a Twelve Step Program. The difficulties in Barb's life could make a person bitter, but they have only served to deepen her qualities of soul.

Paper presented at the Xavier University Division of Mission & Identity's end of year ceremony,
A Celebration of Excellence, April 7, 2008.

[Special thanks to support staff Joanie Wiedner and student Maggie Meyer, both in Student Gov,
who helped me revise the presentation.]

One thing that Barb excels at is paying attention. Perhaps you know the East Indian greeting, “Namaste.” It means “the god in me greets the god in you.” Barb signs her letters to me “Namaste” and that’s the way she treats everyone. At work, she has contact with families in crisis, and people who are coming in for medication or counseling. She makes a conscious effort to make clients and their families feel welcome. She has a special compassion for people with Drug and Alcohol addictions, because they are so often misunderstood, even in a mental health clinic. She advocates for them sometimes at staff meetings. She has a radiant smile that puts people at ease.

Another thing that Barb excels at is living very intentionally. She makes conscious choices then lives by them. Often these are unconventional choices. When her husband died two years ago, Barb decided that keeping up their home and large property was too much for her. She was interested in community involvement, quilting, and strong relationships, so she cleared out the house, gave most of her furniture away, and moved in with her sister and brother-in-law. At age 55, she has two new roommates. Three adults share house responsibilities, and all three of them welcome adult kids and grandchildren. Barb is happy with her new living arrangement. In warm weather she rides her bicycle several miles to work. She and her sister also make quilts for charity raffles. Even in high school, Barb lived by her own lights, but this quality of being very intentional has gotten stronger with age.

And one more thing: Barb has a talent for appreciating people and simple things. She values all sorts of people, including ones that others might not. She works every Monday evening as a paid companion to a woman who is mentally disabled. She cooks with Marion, plays games, and takes her on outings. At the mental health center, Barb’s also been invited to help lead support groups for people with schizophrenia. Barb doesn’t have professional credentials, but she has a big store of compassion, and she’s a good listener. She doesn’t do these things out of a sense of obligation but because she really enjoys—delights in—the people. She lets Marion and others know how much she appreciates them.

The three qualities I mentioned--attention, intention, appreciation—are all reasons I regard Barb as an excellent human being. They all involve action: paying attention, making choices, saying thank you. The ways Barb spends her life are not easy to measure, yet they are all expressions of Magis. Yet these qualities would probably not show up in career plan or a grading scale. In fact, probably most of the valuable work of the world will never be listed on a resume or an annual report.

My colleague in Theology—Judy Muething—tells me that her dad was a plumber and liked to ask the question: If you lived in a town and both the mayor and the plumber left town for a week, who would be missed first?

As I thought about Barb—still driving down the interstate—I had an epiphany. I needed a new metaphor for thinking about excellence. The measuring stick metaphor may have helped me in the past but it wasn’t helping any more.

Magis isn’t always about being the best looking or the most accomplished or the wealthiest. It’s not about being the biggest or getting to the top or even having the best basketball team or a national reputation. It’s about something more elusive. I found myself having trouble putting this into words till I remembered a conversation with a second wise friend, Rosemary.

I was telling her about all the letters I get in the mail begging for contributions. “I’m committed to charitable giving but I feel overwhelmed! The needs of the world seem endless,” I said. “The more I give, the more begging letters I get, and the worse I feel.”

Rosemary’s response has stayed with me: “The challenge of giving is to figure out what you’re called to do” she said. “Just because a need is real doesn’t mean you have to donate money. It may not be part of your bundle. You have to figure out which bundle God is inviting you to pick up. Whatever you give--and here’s the good part--it should make your heart sing.”

That’s it! I realized--That’s Magis. I pictured myself carrying a bundle of sticks in my arms, and feeling my heart sing. (Can you tell I was once a Girl Scout and spent lots of time gathering firewood?) Magis is choosing what belongs in your bundle. My bundle won’t be the same as Barb’s or my mom’s or the person who works in the next office—but it will be my bundle.

Picking up your bundle demands discernment, of course. It means paying attention to my life and the world around me. For me that's meant daily quiet time for spiritual reading and opening my heart to God. It means paying attention to my yearnings, not just society's shoulds. Out of this quiet comes the ability hear God and to make conscious choices about what I feel called to do and the love and respect I bring to my tasks. Discernment means arranging my life so I can become the kind of person I'm called to be.

When we think of Magis as a measuring stick, it's too easy to lose perspective. We focus on things that can be measured or counted, things that are outward. Magis is about something much more essential. It's about a quality of presence we bring to our work—how we treat other people—about the choices we make in our lives. It may not always be recognized formally but you know it when you see it—a little like when a pregnant woman first has the feeling of quickening.

When we view Magis as a bundle, new possibilities open up. It can change over time, and it requires personal responsibility yet it is not a solo effort. We share our bundles or trade them off at times. We need each other to tell us when our bundle has gotten too big. You can apply it to almost any honest endeavor, from designing a new campus to doing laundry—even cleaning or all the other day-to-day work of world.

Some people's bundles are larger than others, but none is more important. I think of my departmental secretary, Linda Loomis who is so competent. Or the campus police officer who comes to jump my car battery. Or think of Miss Dorothy in the Gallagher Center [recently died]. For nearly 40 years she brought Magis to food services. Or Walt Bonvell and the grounds crew who have made our campus so beautiful. All these speak to me of Magis.

All things are passing, St. Theresa of Avila tells us, all things return to dust. Even our cherished buildings will one day become dust. Only love ultimately endures. What will not perish are the love and the energy that love releases. This sense of Magis stretches into eternity.

So I invite you all to consider what sticks make up your bundle? What are the values that mark your life? Think back to Barb's actions: paying attention, making choices, saying thank you. Do you pay loving attention to the people around you? Have you listened to the Spirit's guidance in choosing your sticks? Are your outer choices consistent with your inner values? Do you take time to appreciate your co workers and to say thank you? Perhaps you could imagine a conversation with a great spiritual leader, such as Dorothy Day or the Dalai Lama or St. Ignatius or Buddha or Muhammed or Jesus. If one of them could follow you through the work day, what might they say about your bundle? Does your bundle make your heart sing?

In my hometown Methodist church, on Easter morning, the pastor read this passage from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 15: 51+). It seems a good way to close: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . . For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. . . . Therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord."

*Trudelle Thomas is author of Spirituality in the Mother Zone (Paulist Press, 2005) and a Professor of English at Xavier University. She's a mentor in the Ignatian Mentoring program and is available to speak on Ignatian spirituality as it relates to every day life at work or home. She will be speaking on "Values and Personal Finance: Connecting the Dots", at Xavier University and at Fairfield University Fall 2008. You can contact her at thomas@xavier.edu.



Figure 2

Rethinking “Magis” in an Addictive Culture: The Less-is-More Approach to “The More”

Magis – “Latin for more; suggesting a spirit of excellence; commitment to quality.”
(From Do You Talk Ignatian? By George Traub).

Thomas – A spirit of excellence invites us into a commitment to quality, intentionality, balance, and collaboration. It is marked by respectful relationships and by compassion for self and others.

An Addictive View

1. Tunnel-vision
 - Specialization without larger context
 - Attachment to own agenda
 - Excessive seriousness and solemnity
 - Excessive individualism
2. Excessive focus on work-life
 - Strong separation between personal values and work values
 - Work always comes first

 - Disregard for health and relationships (unless life-threatening)
 - Maintenance of status quo
3. Over-reliance on outward signs of success
 - Accept values of workplace uncritically

 - No time for daily examen
 - Quantifiable measures of success only (achievement, affluence, attractiveness) success
 - Busy-ness seen as a status symbol
4. Lack of compassion for self and others
 - Disregard for human limitations
 - Maintain appearance of success
 - Deficit orientation (preoccupation with perceived shortcomings of self and others)

 - Perfectionism
“Prove that you merit respect”

The Less-Is-More Alternative

1. Perspective
 - “Big picture” orientation
 - Detachment when needed
 - Sense of humor
 - Ability to collaborate
2. Harmony and balance
 - Congruence between inner and outer values
 - Adequate balance between work and family
 - Attention to health and honest relationships (ongoing)
 - Commitment to growth and renewal
3. Inner authority
 - Development of personal Rule of Life
 - Daily examen; discernment
 - Cultivation of an inner compass to determine

 - A human pace of life
4. Compassion and respect for self and others
 - Care for the body
 - Candor about mistakes
 - Strengths orientation (focus on strengths of self and others)
 - Unconditional positive regard assumed for self and others

My thinking has been shaped by Anne Wilson Shaef (The Addictive Society), Elizabeth Liebert, Christiana Northrup, and others.

Figure 3

<p>Physical well-being. decent nutrition, sleep, physical activity, and sometimes medical intervention.</p>	<p>Worldview respect. Feeling that one’s worldview is respected by others. Respecting worldviews that are different than your own.</p>	<p>Outreach/ service. “Working for the welfare of others is the best antidote to despair.” Sharing joy or sorrow with others.</p>	<p>Safe, calm places. Places that are protected from noise and tension. Beautiful spaces.</p>	<p>Contact with nature. The three salts—the sweat of hard work, tears, the sea. Pets. Walks in the countryside. Wilderness. Time alone outdoors. Gardening.</p>
<p>Community. “Unconditional high regard”. Family and friends. Caring. Encouragement.</p>	<p>Beauty. Exposure to beauty in music, nature, language, the visual arts. Beauty spaces. Texture and touch.</p>	<p>Creative Expression through visual arts, making music, writing, dance, crafts, and other creative endeavors.</p>	<p>Hope. Keeping hope alive by believing things will get better. Religious faith. Contact with children. Finding meaning for the future</p>	<p>Self-determination Having a say so about your life and your attitudes. Pride. Learning.</p>
<p>Rites of initiation. A sense of purpose. “Why am I here?” “The power of small gesture.” Rituals that mark the beginning.</p>	<p>Cleansing experiences. Deliberately letting go of negative experiences. Rituals to help absolve, release. Forgiveness.</p>	<p>Celebration & festivity. Parties. Sharing food, humor, dance, games, fun. Celebrating strengths and victories.</p>	<p>Prayer & meditation. Calming oneself down. Reaching out to God or a Higher Power.</p>	<p>Social activism & advocacy. Working for justice and better living conditions for others. Future orientation.</p>

Healing Packages: Finding God in All Things Healing Fifteen Curative Factors That Cross Cultures

Based in part on Mary Pipher’s Ch. 10, “Healing in All Times and Places” In The Middle of Everywhere, 2002. And Also “Cross Cultural Curative Factors” (Frank, 1972; Torrey, 1986), thanks to Shelagh Larkin.