

MENTOR'S REFLECTION

Rethinking Magis

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*working with Mentee Shelagh Larkin, MSW/LISW (Social Work)
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During the past year Shelagh Larkin and I met regularly to talk about Ignatian principles, particularly in regard to her seniors in Field Instruction, and juniors in Pre-Placement for Field. I supplied her with several articles on spirituality, some from a feminist perspective and some from a Jesuit perspective, and she supplied me with several readings about the pressing need to integrate spirituality in Social Work. I found our exchanges to be intellectually stimulating and spiritually provocative, as well as a lot of fun. We both felt that our mentoring relationship was one of the best professional development experiences we've had at Xavier.

We shared similarities and differences. We both embrace feminism, and she allowed me to realize I too have "the heart of a social worker" toward the needy. Also the difference in our spiritual orientations was an asset; I view myself as a "post-denominational Christian" while Shelagh described herself as a "spiritual humanist." My training as a writer/writing teacher and her training as a social worker allowed us to form an especially interesting partnership.

As a result of our mentoring relationship, I developed three graphics that I plan to use with my students that I hope will be helpful to others interested in Ignatian spirituality:

1. Rethinking Magis in an Addictive Culture: A Less-Is-More Approach
2. Rule of Life: The Wheel of Practices for Creating a Personalized Rule of Life
3. An Array of Healing Packages: Finding God in All Things Healing

All of these are especially suitable for using with seniors or others preparing to begin professional life. I have used them with students preparing for Service Learning Semesters and with pre-service English teachers. Shelagh used "The Wheel" with her seniors in Field Instruction in connection with their capstone paper, "Professional Development of Self."

Other faculty are welcome to use any of these three graphics provided you give proper credit. I also welcome correspondence about them at thomast@xavier.edu.

The Problem with Magis

Though I have an abiding appreciation for Ignatian principles, I have always felt ambivalent about the concept of Magis, a commitment to excellence, or "the

more.” When I read the “generosity prayer” of St. Ignatius, these words make me uncomfortable: “Help me to give and not count the cost . . . to toil and not seek for rest.” Because we live in a society that often rewards addictive behavior (especially workaholism and materialism), defining Magis simply as “the More” can reinforce compulsive activity, particularly in the realm of work. It can also lead to exploitation of those on the lower rungs of any organizational hierarchy. Our mentoring relationship gave me a chance to devote some reflection time to my discomfort with Magis.

As a female faculty member trying to find a sustainable balance between my work life (teaching, research, and service), my own interior life, and my family life (parent, spouse, daughter to aging parents, etc.), I have often been haunted by the sense that no matter how hard I work or how carefully I manage my time, I will never possibly accomplish enough to fulfill my responsibilities according to the high standards I set for myself. Defining Magis as “the More” or “the spirit of excellence” has reinforced this guilty feeling that I should be *doing more*, especially early in my career.

In time, I came to realize that this was not simply a personal problem, but rather a problem faced by many people who are tending families while building careers in academia and other fields historically male. I discovered there is a psychological term for this feeling of “never-enough”: “insatiability” is a psychological term used to refer to people who compulsively seek more possessions, more money, more stimulation, etc. It is also applied to those who compulsively seek more activity and productivity. Whatever the object, insatiability undermines job satisfaction and can work against spiritual well-being. Unfortunately, U.S. culture reinforces the insatiable search for more consumption, work, and a narrow kind of productivity.

As a result of my discomfort, I have begun to articulate another way to think about Magis. Now, for me Magis means a life of service that is sustainable and balanced. It is a life that is marked by quality and intentionality, rather than simply by quantity. I’m inspired by the Benedictines’ emphasis on a life balanced between study, work and prayer. A more contemporary example is that of Helen and Scott Nearing, authors of *Living the Good Life...How to Live Sanelly and Simply in a Troubled World*, who divided their lives among “bread work,” cultural work, and community involvement, devoting four hours a day to each. Shelagh explained to me that the question of “work life balance” is explicitly addressed in the professional literature in Social Work. Certainly the huge influx of women into the paid work force over the past thirty-five years makes the question especially significant.

My new view of Magis led me to develop Figure 1 below, “Rethinking Magis.” It can help our students as they transition into the paid work force and parenthood.

Rule of Life: A Sustainable Professional Life for Our Graduates (and Ourselves)

Closely related to Magis is the idea of developing a personalized Rule of Life. Shelagh invited me to give a talk to her Senior Seminar (which runs concurrently with Field Instruction) on the need to find spiritual practices and habits as they transition into professional life. I explained to students that “practices” refers to habitual, intentional activities (also known as disciplines) that an individual or a religious community chooses to observe in order to deepen its openness to God. A “Rule of Life” refers to a set of such practices that serves as a sort of template for living. Historically a “Rule of Life” has referred to a set of communal practices but in recent years many lay people are developing a personalized rule of life adapted to their individual circumstances.

The professional literature in Social Work addresses the need for self-care. Social workers are at risk for burn-out and compassion fatigue, so it is especially important for them to practice self-care. Yet often self-care is defined too narrowly as stress-management or commercialized “me-time” (vacations, shopping, exercise, manicures, etc.) without any attention to spiritual needs. We both felt the Ignatian tradition had something to offer soon-to-be social workers. I wanted to offer them a way to think about self care that was rooted in a sense of interiority that included listening to God and paying attention to daily experience as a place to encounter the Divine.

This desire led me to develop Figure 2 below: Rule of Life: The Wheel of Practices for Creating a Personalized Rule of Life. This “wheel” grows out of the Ignatian tradition and also out of a renewed interest in the United States in contemplative “practices.” It includes six different types of spiritual activities. These activities appear in different world religions and are adaptable to different faith traditions or to a spiritual life apart from organized religion.

In my presentation to Shelagh’s seniors, I described the six types of practices, with special emphasis on two: Silence and Solitude; and Home-front Economics (the use of resources of time, money, energy, etc.). Students were quite enthusiastic about the talk, and about my emphasis on these two categories. My presentation was followed by breakout questions, and Shelagh went on to tie Rule of Life presentation to the seniors’ capstone paper, “Professional Development of Self”, due a month or so later (at the end of spring term). She reports on this assignment elsewhere in this volume of Teaching to the Mission.

This graphic on “Rule of Life” grows out of my own research for a book-in-progress. My research led me to discover several practical, beautiful books on the spiritual disciplines geared to contemporary readers. Although not all are explicitly Ignatian, they all offer valuable guidance on “finding God in all things” and developing an interior life. They are listed at the end of this essay.

Healing Packages: Resilience in the Face of Suffering

I'm regularly invited to give a presentation on journaling to Service Learning students who are preparing to spend a semester overseas. They write in a journal to record their service experiences, then use it as the basis for a reflection essay on the whole service experience. Upon their return students often feel depressed and cynical about how much lower the standard of living is in Third World countries compared to first world countries, and become alienated from the United States. I saw a need for a way to reflect on the strengths of their home countries as well as the shortcomings (in much the way that social workers are trained to assess clients in terms of their strengths, not simply their problems).

When I give my journal talk, I use figure 3 to show practices or activities that many world cultures use to promote health and well-being. I invite students to compare the ways these practices appear in the U.S. with the way they appear in their host countries. This helps them to see the strengths of both cultures and countries, and to consider ways they might import some of what they have learned. Not all of them will be able to return to Nicaragua or India, but all will have opportunities to work for a more just and healthy world. I see these values as growing out of the Jesuit concern with "cura personalis"—care of the whole person. While the "Wheel of Practices" shows various practices that individuals can implement voluntarily, this graphic shows larger communal practices. (I drew upon various readings that Shelagh supplied and especially upon psychologist Mary Pipher's 2002 book, The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community). The word "packages" is used by Pipher.) This graphic helps to consider many different aspects of a culture that can promote health and wholeness, including intangible aspects; it helps them see beyond a sole focus on economic resources. (During his Spring 07 visit to Xavier, Dr. Paul Farmer talked about the limitations of a "cost-effectiveness" approach to health in Third World countries; this graphic encourages students to look beyond a deficit model and identify other resources.)

Recommended Reading:

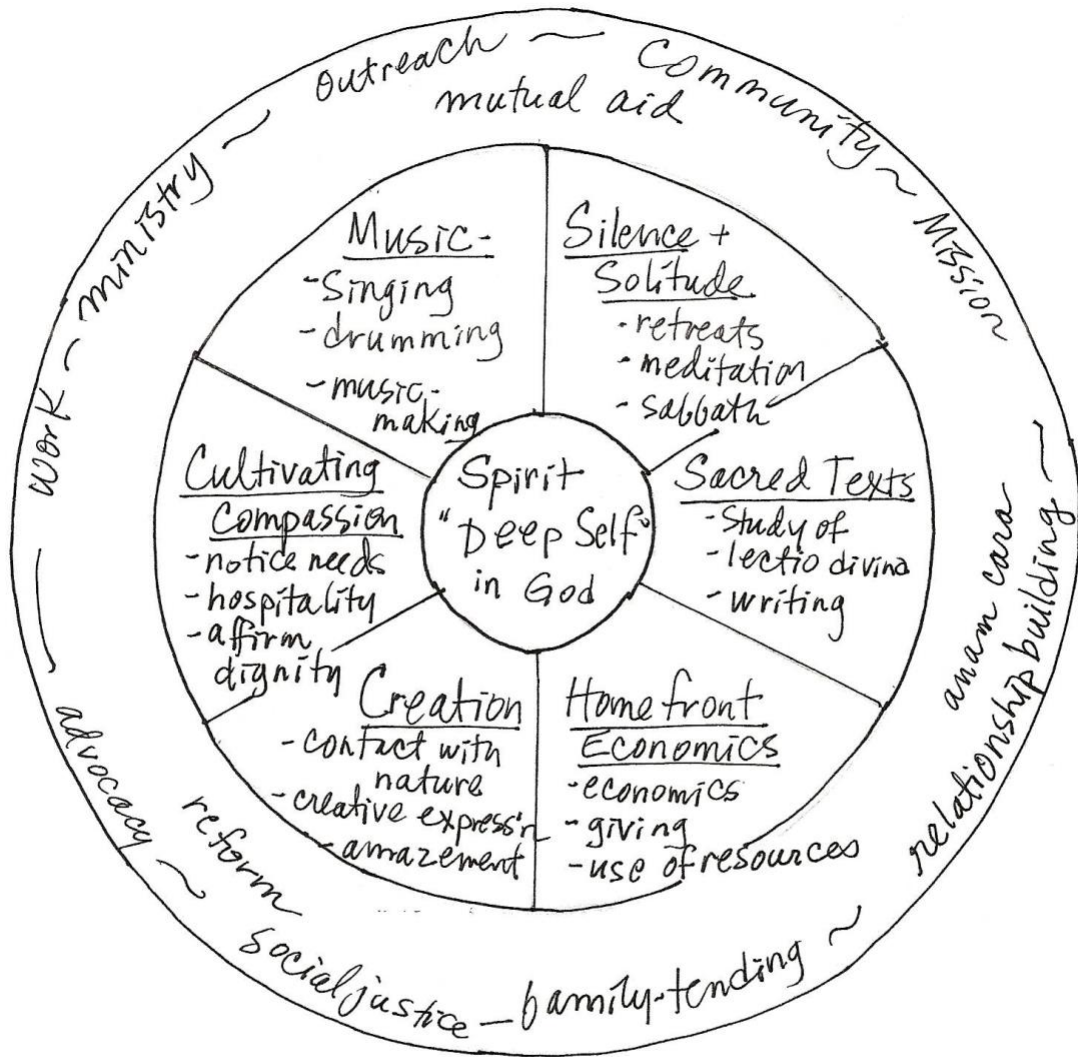
The following are books that helped me develop the graphics above, especially "A Personalized Rule of Life." I think any of them are valuable to other mentors, mentees, and students who want to adapt Ignatian spirituality to contemporary life. Barton's book draws on St. Ignatius explicitly, though it was published by an evangelical publisher.

Barton, Ruth Haley. Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
My personal favorite.

Bass, Dorothy, and Don C. Richter, eds. Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2002.

- Foster, Richard J. Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
- Nearing, Helen and Scott. Living the Good Life. . . How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World. Harborside, ME: Social Science Institute, 1954.
- Pipher, Mary. The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community. New York: Harcourt, 2002.
- Taylor, Betsy. What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy: Tips for Parenting in a Commercial World. New York: Time Warner Books, 2003.
- Thompson, Marjorie. Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life. Louisville: WJK Press, 2005.
- Dyckman, Katherine, et al. The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001.

Figure 1



A Personal Rule of life
(Choose among time-tested practices.)
(by Trudelle Thomas)

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, Christian 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.