

An Experience of the Contemporary Personally Guided Spiritual Exercises

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Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith, 1978

SAM KEEN: My essay "Education for Serendipity," which is published in *To a Dancing God*, was a start at saying what education would look like in a healthy society. I know a bit more now about education than I did when I wrote that, and I am more than ever convinced that the main thing that needs to be introduced is a more primitive approach. We need more techniques that touch the affective domain.

We need, for example, to teach people to stay in touch with their dreams. Dreams are the opening edge of our craziness. If you stay in touch with your dreams, you will probably not have to make a crazy journey.

Second, if we teach people to maintain touch with their own bodies, that will also help. Teaching direct experiential disciplines, like meditation and sensory awareness, or unconscious awareness and the reading of unconscious symbolism, will help. We know how to do this now, but it is being done largely under the guise of therapy rather than as education. This awareness is crucial to enable people to move through life without having to tear up everything around them to make their journey. They should have more gentle techniques at

hand. The tragedy of our society is that so few of us (especially the elite who got there because their heads were hard as rocks) can learn to soften our heads without some other part of the body running away for a while.

JIM FOWLER: Sometimes these techniques lie in unexpected places or in places that are overlooked because of misunderstanding or excessive familiarity. I last discovered this (and one discovers it over and over) when I began working on the faith development project. I realized that I was getting awfully Apollonian and awfully dry. *Dry* is almost an understatement. I was virtually shipwrecked in terms of being cast upon the sand away from the water.

In my class that year there was a group of Jesuits. They kept saying in subtle ways that Ignatian spirituality was becoming very important to the Jesuits again. It might be important for me too. My image of Saint Ignatius was not an inviting one, but the Jesuits kept at it in a persistent, gentle, brotherly way. Finally, one of them gave me a copy of *The Spiritual Exercises*, written by Saint Ignatius. It is not a very edifying book to read, at least not prior to any experience in using it.

I went to a Jesuit spiritual director in Cambridge and said, “Look. I need some help. My own prayer life and my living with the Scriptures is all dried up. I’m in trouble.”

He said, “I don’t know if I can help you or not,” but he took me on in an extended retreat. With great gentleness and in a unique relationship—not as a therapist or pastor in the sense of having answers, but more like a coach—he introduced me to the “new” method that he taught.

“I want you to take this story of the feeding of the five thousand, and I want you to mediate on it for three days. Just spend an hour a day. I want you to start off just mastering the thing. Use your cognitive abilities to get every detail of the story. Get everything down. Repeat it so that the narrative gets into you.

“The next day I want you to try to let loose of what you did the day before. Now I want you to read yourself into the story. I want you to sensually participate in it. I want you to smell the smells of that crowd. I want you to hear the sounds of their voices. I want you to feel them jostling up against you. I want you to see them and to see

Jesus. Above all, I want you to taste that food. Above all, I want you to taste it.”

Some extraordinary things began to happen as I followed his directions. On the third day my task was to let my mind play. I was to let it be open to my own hungers. I was to ask myself what I was hungry for. Where did I need to be fed? Who feeds me? What food is there that I cannot get along without?

I discovered a porousness between my conscious and my unconscious mind. Images began to rise and meet images from the story. It was almost as if that part of me which is usually in control was in neutral. A new kind of transaction between myself and the text began to occur. I began to see how that tradition could be an instrument of the spirit in a way and degree that were different from anything I had known before.

I got in touch with my needs, with my hungers. I found a vulnerability. And I found a mediator. All this was in a way that I had not found from using my cognitive approach. I think that the sort of method found in the *Spiritual Exercises* is very promising for groups and for individuals. It is a native, Christian, and Western method of doing some of the things that we are learning about from other sources. Ignatius was very much like Carl Jung in his understanding of the way the unconscious produces symbols that can depict our situation, our needs, our directional tendency.