Meet the Guide

My Day Job: I am writing a programmer’s guide on how to overcome the problems in computer date management when we enter the next millennium. How come, then, I am sitting here reflecting on the ways in which the insights of a man who lived 500 years ago in a remote Basque village in northern Spain affect the way in which we relate to God today, on the threshold of the twenty-first century? I sometimes think that my PC will give a little shudder of culture shock when I expect it to process my thoughts on the problems of two-digit date notation and the search for my deepest desire at the same time.

This coming together of two worlds apparently so far removed from each other is perhaps in itself a pointer to some of the treasures that are ours today through the legacy of Ignatius Loyola and the Society of Jesus, which he founded. If we can imagine his browsing through this book, or sitting among us as we explore these questions together, he would probably be smiling to himself and muttering something about “finding God in all things.” He would find it completely normal and healthy that we should be searching to deepen our relationship with God in the midst of life as we really live it—up to our ears in work or lack of it, mortgages, children, and mess. He would be delighted to find that most of us are laypeople, as he was when he was making his own journey of discovery. He would surely welcome the fact that we come from many different church traditions or even from none at all. And he

would be more than tolerant of the checkered histories we may have behind us, remembering the excesses of his own misspent youth. Most of all, he would recognize the love of God that is burning inside each of us; that is always leading us onward, like a beacon, toward deepening our relationship with him, because this would reflect the experience of Ignatius’s own heart and the source of his prodigious energy.

So who was this man whose life and discoveries are still affecting our own journeys so fruitfully? Before we begin our journey proper, let’s indulge for a few minutes in a time shift that takes us back to the age when Europe was in a similar kind of between-age turmoil to the one we are experiencing now. This new age isn’t just causing havoc to our computer systems but also seems to include a heightened awareness in people everywhere (whether they call themselves religious or not) that there is more to life than the mere management of our days to achieve comfort and security in the shifting landscapes of our lives.

Iñigo Lopez lived at the time when the world was coming painfully and violently out of the Middle Ages. The mere facts of his life can be summed up in a few sentences; its content was to be infinitely more far-reaching. He was born in 1491, the youngest of a family of thirteen, in Loyola, in the Basque region of northern Spain. When he was fourteen, he was sent away to train as a royal page to the king of Spain, and was introduced to the ideals of chivalry and knightly service. As he grew older, he developed more than a passing interest in women, both those far away in his daydreams, and those who were temptingly accessible. The last thing on his mind during these years was his spiritual journey or the inner movements of his heart.

His life swerved around a big bend during his mid-twenties. The favor that his employer, Don Juan Velasquez, had enjoyed in the royal court came to an abrupt end at the death of the king. As a result, Iñigo himself was unemployed, and chastened by his experience of how quickly and easily the power of riches and influence can disappear. With a parting gift of a few hundred crowns and two horses from the widow of his former employer, he had to set off into the unknown and start again.
The next phase of his life was in the household of the duke of Najera, who employed him as a gentleman-at-arms. Frigo learned to use weapons and helped to put down rebellions. His military training under the duke brought him, four years later, to a place called Pamplona, where he commanded a company defending the fortress there against a French invasion. The defense had become futile and defeat was a certainty, but Frigo was stubborn to the limits and absolutely refused to surrender. The price of his resistance came in the form of a cannonball, which shattered his leg and broke his right knee. His days as a soldier ended on a stretcher; he was transported in agony and humiliation across the mountains to his family home in Loyola.

It must have seemed like the end of the line. Probably most of us can identify with that drained, empty feeling of being at the end of our dreams and our resources, or helpless in pain or immobility, either in body or in mind. We can imagine how it might have been for this young man, in the prime of his life, to lie a helpless invalid, wracked by pain, with nothing but his broken dreams for company. So daydreaming is just what he did.

Having asked in vain for some lively romantic novels to read, Frigo had to make do with what the castle could offer, which turned out to be a Life of Christ and a Lives of the Saints. This sickened and disgruntled patient spent his time between reading and daydreaming of all that might have been, had his injury not robbed him, in a stroke, of both his future as a soldier and his attractiveness to women.

Daydreaming! Ironic that this man whose military skills and leadership potential were so remarkable should have come down to us, most powerfully, as a daydreamer. But Frigo's daydreams held a potent secret. They had, locked up inside them, the key to the gift of discernment. And how did Frigo discover for himself this key that was to open up a gold mine in his heart?

As the tedious, pain-ridden days passed, Frigo indulged in two kinds of dreaming. On the one hand, he still dreamed of the battles he would command, the military glories he would achieve, the noble ladies he would woo and win. But they were the dreams of "what might have been," and though they raised his spirits for a short while as he enjoyed the fantasy, they left him, in the longer term, feeling flat and disconsolate.

On the other hand, fired by the books he had been given, he started to dream of a king whose service was potentially even more desirable than that of the king of Spain; he began to wonder how this Christ King might be served; he began to dream of outsainting the saints in this great new quest that might be worth spending his life on. They were still daydreams, but he noticed an important difference in their aftereffects. These dreams left him feeling inspired, energized, and eager. They were not about what might have been but about something that still lay dormant in the depths of his own heart, like a seed that had been mysteriously germinated and was pushing its way to the surface of his life through all this heavy soil of pain and disappointment. These were dreams that didn't go away.

It was into this realization of the difference between daydreams and God dreams (as we might call them) that the gift of discernment was given to Frigo. It was there that he discovered what we might call the "inner compass" of his heart, which was able to reveal to him which movements within him were capable of engaging his deepest vital energy, and which were leading him only to fleeting satisfactions that left him unchanged and unfulfilled. As he lay there in his enforced stillness and solitude, he learned to notice his moods and feelings and reactions and to measure them against this unseen compass. In his inner silence, he listened with fresh awareness to an invitation coming from deep inside himself to enlist in the adventure of the service of God.

As he ventured more and more deeply into the stories that were inspiring his new kind of daydreaming, he was also finding a new way of exercising his imagination. He began to find himself, in imagination, present in the scenes, conversations, and stories of the Gospels, and he began to participate in the plots of these stories. It was the start, for him, of an adventure into imaginative prayer that was to become a most powerful catalyst for the growth of his personal relationship with God, a method of prayer that is just as vividly available to us today.

On his sickbed, Frigo experienced deep conversion. Gradually, after many setbacks, he limped his way back to life, but it was never again to
be the life that he had known before, the cannonball had blown that life to pieces. Now Inigo was a pilgrim of God, to whom he was ready to offer all his ideals of knightly service, courage, and persistence. The next step was to tell his family—.... and, as for so many who have walked this path in their own personal ways since then (including, surely, many of you who are reading this book today), this wasn't easy! Against a backdrop of pressure to use his skills and gifts to bring honor to the family name and help maintain the family property, Inigo made his excuses and left, with neither he nor his family knowing with any certainty where he was headed. Inigo—the nobleman, the soldier, the fearless defender of Pamplona—had become Inigo the pilgrim.

The first stage of the pilgrimage—that search for the "I know not what," that was urging him onwards—took Inigo to the Abbey of Montserrat, high on a jagged mountain peak overlooking the plain of Manresa. Here he desired to make a full confession of the sins of his earlier life and begin again. His confession is said to have taken three days to make, and he received absolution from one of the monks there. He exchanged his nobleman's dress for the simple outfit of a poor pilgrim and made a night vigils of prayer. He gave his clothes to a beggar and his mule to the monks. He left his sword and dagger behind as an offering at the altar and as a sign that he had exchanged his life in the service of the world's values for one committed to the service of God.

As the new pilgrim made his way down the hill of Montserrat to the plain below, his mind must have been full of the experience of his conversion, his confession, his vigils, and the advice he had been given by the monks on the life of prayer. To all this new experience, he surely applied the ways of discernment that he had discovered in his dreams at Loyola. He felt the need to stay awhile, in quiet, to reflect on all that had passed and everything that God seemed to be showing him through it. He also made some notes on his reflections. And so it happened that, instead of going straight to Barcelona as he had intended, he settled in the nearby town of Manresa for "a few days," which stretched into eleven months. In Manresa, the next stage of his life took shape.

Determined to live true to all that he had promised God in Montserrat, the proud and self-willed Inigo now faced a life of begging for his daily food, while submitting to the relentless mockery of street urchins who were probably better dressed and cared for than he was. Living out the high dream of the mountain when he was down on the plain in the heat and dust of everyday reality proved to be, for him as for us, a constant struggle. He treated himself harshly, but he never forgot the agony of his own long sickness at Loyola, and he turned that memory into service by trying to help the sick in the hospitals of Manresa. He prayed until prayer became part of his every waking moment. At last he found a cave near the river where he made himself a desert home. That cave was to become a space where his love and understanding of God would deepen beyond anything he could have imagined, where he would receive insights that remain fresh and valid for us today, and where, very important for us, he was to capture the fruits of his conversion, his prayer, and his reflections in written form.

Perhaps inevitably, given what a good thing was gestating in his heart, Inigo also fell victim to the onslaught of negative movements, or "false spirits," as he would have called them. He suffered endless self-recrimination about his sins, real and imagined. He experienced dark depths of despair and came close to taking his own life. It was, perhaps, a black time, shot through with golden streaks of insight and passionate commitment to God, or it was a golden time of spiritual growth and maturing, shot through with the darkest shafts of doubt and despair. Either way of looking at it may find its parallels in our own experience—we have those times in our lives that are at once fraught with struggle and alight with the flame of our hearts' desires.

From Manresa came a man who had freely bound himself in joyful service to a king called Christ. He had been so opened to the inpouring of the Holy Spirit that he was able to interpret his own experience in a way that has universal validity and significance. The fruit of this experience and the wisdom that it engendered is recorded in an unassuming little book called the Spiritual Exercises. Inigo's notebook was to become a guide, based entirely on his own experience, on how to become increasingly sensitive to God's action in our lives, how to discover and live true to the very deepest desires within us, how to make decisions that reflect God's indwelling presence in the innermost freedom of our
The Spiritual Exercises
- Discovering who I really am
- Directing myself toward God
- Noticing God's action in my life
- Responding to the movements of my heart
- Discovering the nature of my deepest desire
- Seeking God's will
- Becoming free of all that distracts me from my deepest desire
- Making choices in line with my truest self
- Connecting my lived experience with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ
- Responding to God's love for me
- Finding God in all things

hearts, and how to join our lives consciously with the life of Jesus, God-made man, through the living spirit of the gospel.

It would be wise to record that Ignatius went from strength to strength in his life of discipleship. Of course, it wasn't so. How could it be? We all know, too well, that things are never like that. Ignatius's dream of serving God in the Holy Land was intrinsically vexed by the authorities there. His travels were overtaken by ill health and near shipwreck. His attempts to help others by sharing his Exercises in spiritual conversations brought opposition from the Church, which eventually subjected him to the Inquisition, and the secular authorities, who among other things threatened him with a public birching. Injustice, humiliation, and betrayal became his familiar companions, but they were carrying a hidden gift: through them he came to realize that his desire to be with Christ was stronger than his desire to avoid the indignities and disgrace that the world and the Church meted out to him.

Despite all this, the word companion became central to Ignatius's life. In Manresa, Ignatius had already begun to share his experiences with a few friends who showed interest in his Exercises. He used his own notes as a guide to helping them. This continues to be the way in which the Exercises are used: as a guide to a director, mentor, or soul-friend in helping another person discover, through prayer and reflection, God's action in his or her life.

Ignatius's ministry of companionship grew stronger when he became a student in Paris, belatedly trying to acquire the academic qualifications that would overcome the objections the Church raised against his speaking to others of spiritual matters without ecclesiastical authority. He was eventually ordained in 1536 at the age of forty-five and adopted the name Ignatius. Before this, though, he and his friends in Paris, Francis Xavier and Peter Favre, were to deepen their friendship into a bond that forged them into the first Jesuits, as together they formed the Society of Jesus. By 1534, this little group of companions had grown to seven, and on August 15 of that year they bound themselves into an embryonic religious order. On that day they shared the Eucharist together, made their vows, and then celebrated a picnic.

Over 450 years separate us from that inconspicuous event on the outskirts of Paris. For the first seven Jesuits, there was surely no sense of disconnection between the deep seriousness of their commitment to God and to each other and the simple, exuberant joy of their celebratory picnic. Among the many riches that have come down to us from that small group of friends, we might focus on that coming together of all that makes us human: our searching and desiring, our failing and falling and fun loving, our shipwrecks and our picnics.

Just as my computer accepts all that comes, whether it be ancient spiritualities or problems of binary notation, so our inner journeys, surely, are about all of us, just as we are, with no arbitrary demarcations between work and prayer, between secular and spiritual, or between God and "real life." Ignatian spirituality is about finding God in our lived experience and allowing him to transform that experience through his Spirit, for ourselves and for the whole human family.

The explorations in this book, like Ignatius's own, also began as a response to groups of friends who wanted to come together to share their search for God. Like his, they are carved out of personal experience—some of it joyful, some of it painful, all of it lived. They are offered in the spirit of Ignatius in the hope that they may provide a few landmarks in the mysterious and sometimes hazardous terrain of our hearts, as we make the journey inward toward the pearl of great price that lies both at our own deepest center and far beyond our wildest imaginations.

On a journey we use landmarks to give us a point of recognition. We notice something we recognize—some feature of the landscape—and it locates our position: "Yes, I recognize that! So I must be somewhere around there." They give us confidence that we are not completely lost. They help us to find our bearings and discern the direction for the next stage of the journey. When we are in unfamiliar terrain (and life, for all
of us, as we move into the future, is unfamiliar territory, landmarks help us to locate ourselves and encourage us to keep walking. Something outside ourselves—something that everyone can see and recognize (even though they may see it from a different perspective and give it a different name) relates to precisely where we are. It places us, as individuals, within the wider landscape.

Maps and guidebooks would do just as well, you might say. And when it comes to the spiritual journey of our hearts, there is no shortage of maps and guidebooks, ranging from the “Go this way, or else!” variety of creed and catechism, to the “Fifty ways to climb the ladder of perfection” sort. The thing they all have in common is that they can be read in an armchair. They can all teach you how to swim without getting wet.

Landmarks won’t let you do that. They are of no use at all unless you are on the road! They are effective only in that they connect where you are, in your own lived experience, to a point of recognition and orientation, for your own story and for the whole human story.

I remember once smiling over a particularly colorful description of a walk by the late A. Wainwright in one of his mountain walk guides, which included the bizarre instruction to “turn left at the third hawthorn tree.” This unlikely piece of wisdom made a gentle mockery of all the intricately drawn maps in the book. That third hawthorn tree just had to be discovered. It was a clue on a treasure hunt, and it demanded not only that I actually make the walk but that I do it now before the number and arrangement of the hawthorn trees should change beyond recognition. It was information distilled from his own walking of the path, and gladly, exuberantly, shared with me, his reader and fellow walker. The excitement of his own discovery infected me with the desire to make my own. It felt both personal and universal, rich with the paradox of a season ticket valid only for the present moment.

Landmarks, like hawthorn trees, are also useful only when there is some light to see by. Even people who are on the way and committed to following the right path will encounter times of obscurity and darkness when the evidence is hidden or the signals are mixed. Inner Compass also explores ways of developing the skills and resources needed for those times when we walk by faith and not by sight.

Perhaps the landmarks in this book share something of the quality of Wainwright’s third hawthorn tree. You may recognize them, though you might not call them by the names I know them by. I hope they may help you find your own way to the greater treasure beyond the clues and encourage you to use your own inner compass with confidence and trust. But you won’t find them until you take the risk of losing yourself, by setting out and by keeping going, in the timeless urgency of the present moment. This kind of journey is not for “pillars of the Church.” It is for “people of the way.”