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crazy to deny that for Ignatius “being spiritual” wasn’t the most important thing in the world. It’s crazy to separate God or Jesus from Ignatian spirituality under Ignatius’s writings absurd. God was at the center of life. The Jesuit founder would have some pointed out to you likely in a very long letter—about someone who practices from his love of God.

It’s not new that God meets people where they are. We’re on our paths to God. And on different paths, God has been. If you’ve traversed a circuitous route, and he recognized you, he cannot be limited to people who consider themselves “not so Ignatian spirituality naturally embraces everyone from the devout believer to the tentative seeker. To use one of Ignatius’s expressions, his path is “a way of proceeding” that leads to God.

It’s not new to make Ignatian spirituality understandable, or to make it work for everybody, no matter where you are in life, but to emphasize the centrality of God in the Ignatian worldview, too.

Don’t worry if you don’t feel close to God at the moment. You can feel close to God. Or if you have doubts about God, even if you’re reasonably sure that God doesn’t exist, keep reading.

Take care of the rest.

CHAPTER TWO

The Six Paths

*Spiritual, Religious, Spiritual but Not Religious,
and Everything in Between*

SINCE YOU’RE ALREADY READING this book, I figure that besides being interested in making good choices, finding meaning in your work, enjoying healthy relationships, and being happy in life, you’re at least *mildly* interested in religious questions. So let’s begin with a tough question.

Since the Ignatian way is founded on the belief that there is a God and that God desires to be in relationship with us, it’s important to think about God first. At the very least, it will make everything that comes afterward seem easy by comparison.

This doesn’t mean that you need to believe in God in order to find Ignatius’s insights useful. But to do so, you have to understand where God fits into his worldview.

So: how do I find God?

That question marks the starting point for all seekers. But, surprisingly, many spirituality books downplay or ignore it. Some books assume you already believe in God, that you have already found God, or that God is already part of your life. But it is ridiculous not to address that question in a book like this. It would be like writing a book about swimming without first talking about how to float.

To begin to answer that question—How do I find God?—let’s start with something more familiar. Let’s look at the various ways people seek God.

Even though there are as many individual ways to God as there are people on the earth, for the sake of clarity I'll break down the myriad ways into six broad paths.

Each has its benefits and pitfalls. You may find yourself on several different paths during your lifetime. You may even feel like you're on more than one path at the same time.

SIX PATHS TO GOD

The Path of Belief

For people on this first path, belief in God has always been part of their lives. They were born into religious families or were introduced to religion at an early age. They move through life more or less confident of their belief in God. Faith has always been an essential element of their lives. They pray regularly, attend religious services frequently, and feel comfortable talking about God. Their lives, like every life, are not free from suffering, but faith enables them to put their sufferings into a framework of meaning.

The early life of Walter Cizek, an American Jesuit priest who spent twenty years in Soviet prisons and Siberian labor camps beginning in the 1940s, reflects this kind of upbringing. In his autobiography, *With God in Russia*, published after his return to the United States, Cizek describes growing up in a devout Catholic family in the coal belt of Pennsylvania. Family life centered on the local parish: Sunday Masses, special feast days, weekly confessions. So it is not a surprise when Cizek says this in his book's first chapter: "It must have been through my mother's prayers and example that I made up my mind in the eighth grade, out of a clear blue sky, that I would be a priest."

What for many people would be a difficult decision was for young Walter Cizek the most natural thing in the world.

The benefits of walking along the path of belief are clear: faith gives meaning to both the joys and struggles of life. Faith in God means that you know that you are never alone. You know and are

known. Life within a worshipping community. During times of hardship, faith is an anchor. Faith also holds out the promise of life beyond this world.

This kind of faith sustained Walter Cizek through the Soviet labor camps and enabled him, as he wrote in 1963, to bless the country whose government had caused him physical and mental suffering. At times he struggled: "Who wouldn't in such conditions?—but ultimately I was firm. *With God in Russia* ends with these haunting words: "What Cizek does as his plane takes off: "Slowly, I saw the sign of the cross over the land I was leaving."

Others sometimes envy people who walk the path of belief. "If only I had faith like you!" one friend once said. I understand her sentiment, that perspective that you have something you *have* rather than have to work for. You're born with unquestioning faith, like being born with blue or brown eyes. Or as if faith were like pulling a lever to fill your tank.

Neither metaphor is apt. Ultimately, faith is not something you just have. Perhaps a better metaphor is that faith is like a garden: while you may already have soil, seeds, water—you have to cultivate and nurture it. Faith takes patience, persistence, and even work.

If you envy those on the path of belief, remember that people go through a period of doubt and confusion before they know God. Sometimes for a long time. Ignorance of God's presence at an age when many of his people are busy with way to raising a family and achieving financial success.

None of these six paths is free from danger. For those on the path of belief is an inability to understand other paths and a temptation to judge them from their own belief. Certainty prevents some believers from being open, sympathetic, or even tolerant of others who

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known. Life within a worshipping community provides companion- ship. During times of hardship, faith is an anchor. And the Christian faith also holds out the promise of life beyond this earthly one.

This kind of faith sustained Walter Ciszek during his years in the Soviet labor camps and enabled him, as he finally left Russia in 1963, to bless the country whose government had caused him untold physical and mental suffering. At times he struggled with his belief—who wouldn't in such conditions?—but ultimately his faith remained firm. *With God in Russia* ends with these haunting words, describing what Ciszek does as his plane takes off: "Slowly, carefully, I made the sign of the cross over the land I was leaving."

Others sometimes envy people who walk along the path of belief. "If only I had faith like you!" one friend often tells me. While I understand her sentiment, that perspective makes faith seem like something you *have* rather than have to work at keeping. It's as if you're born with unquestioning faith, like being born with red hair or brown eyes. Or as if faith were like pulling into a gas station and filling your tank.

Neither metaphor is apt. Ultimately, faith is a gift from God. But faith isn't something that you just have. Perhaps a better metaphor is that faith is like a garden: while you may already have the basics—soil, seeds, water—you have to cultivate and nourish it. Like a garden, faith takes patience, persistence, and even work.

If you envy those on the path of belief, don't worry—many people go through a period of doubt and confusion before they come to know God. Sometimes for a long time. Ignatius finally accepted God's presence at an age when many of his peers were well on their way to raising a family and achieving financial success.

None of these six paths is free from dangers. One pitfall for those on the path of belief is an inability to understand people on other paths and a temptation to judge them for their doubt or dis- belief. Certainty prevents some believers from being compassion- ate, sympathetic, or even tolerant of others who are not as certain

in their faith. Their arrogance turns them into the “frozen chosen,” consciously or unconsciously excluding others from their cozy, believing world. This is the crabbed, joyless, and ungenerous religiosity that Jesus spoke against: spiritual blindness.

There is a more subtle danger for this group: a complacency that makes one’s relationship with God stagnate. Some people cling to ways of understanding their faith learned in childhood that might not work for an adult. For example, you might cling to a childhood notion of a God who will never let anything bad happen. When tragedy strikes, since your youthful image of God is not reflected in reality, you may abandon the God of your youth. Or you may abandon God completely.

An adult life requires an adult faith. Think of it this way: you wouldn’t consider yourself equipped to face life with a third-grader’s understanding of math. Yet people often expect the religious instruction they had in grammar school to sustain them in the adult world.

In his book *A Friendship Like No Other*, the Jesuit spiritual writer William A. Barry invites adults to relate to God in an adult way. Just as an adult child needs to relate to his or her parent in a new way, he suggests, so adult believers need to relate to God in new ways as they mature. Otherwise, one remains stuck in a childlike view of God that prevents fully embracing a mature faith.

Like all of the six paths, the path of belief is not without its stumbling blocks.

The Path of Independence

Those on the path of independence have made a conscious decision to separate themselves from organized religion, but they still believe in God. Maybe they find church services meaningless, offensive, dull, or all three. Maybe they’ve been hurt by a church. Maybe they’ve been insulted (or abused) by a priest, pastor, rabbi, minis-

ter, or imam. Or they feel offended by certain aspects of their religion. Or they find religious leaders hypocritical.

Or maybe they’re just bored. Believe me, I’ve heard of sermons and homilies that have put me to sleep, sometimes even a Catholic priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley. The question is not why so many Catholics leave the church, but why they stay.

Catholics may be turned off by the church’s stance on a particular moral question, or its stance on a political issue, or the scandal of clergy sex abuse. Consequently, when they hear about God, they no longer consider themselves part of the church. They are sometimes called “lapsed,” “fallen away,” or “disaffiliated.” Catholics. But, as one friend said after the sex abuse scandal, “It fell away from *me*.”

Though they keep their distance from churches and mosques, many people in this group are still religious. They find solace in the religious practices they learned in childhood. Just as often they long for a more formal religious life in their lives.

One strength of this group is a healthy skepticism that enables them to see things in a fresh way—something that religious communities often desperately need. They are “not on the inside,” who are not bound by the usual restrictions of “appropriate” and “not appropriate” to say within the church. They speak more honestly.

The main danger for this group, however, is that they do not set up any organized religion for failure.

Not long ago, a friend stopped attending church. My friend is an intelligent and compassionate person who loves God and whose parents had deep roots in Episcopalianism. He believed his local church was too aligned with the status quo and decided to search for a community that recognized the needs of the poor in the world.

arrogance turns them into the “frozen chosen,” unconsciously excluding others from their cozy, benevolent, but crabbed, joyless, and ungenerous religiosity. The main danger for this group is spiritual blindness.

A subtle danger for this group: a complacency that their relationship with God stagnate. Some people cling to the faith they learned in childhood that might not hold up. For example, you might cling to a childhood belief that God will never let anything bad happen. When that youthful image of God is not reflected in reality, you may abandon the God of your youth. Or you may abandon

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Friendship Like No Other, the Jesuit spiritual writer invites adults to relate to God in an adult way. Just as a child needs to relate to his or her parent in a new way, he or she needs to relate to God in new ways as they grow up. In other words, one remains stuck in a childlike view of God unless one embraces a mature faith.

On the six paths, the path of belief is not without its

The Path of Independence

People of independence have made a conscious decision to distance themselves from organized religion, but they still believe in God. Maybe they find church services meaningless, offensive, or too free. Maybe they've been hurt by a church. Maybe they were neglected (or abused) by a priest, pastor, rabbi, minis-

ter, or imam. Or they feel offended by certain dogmas of organized religion. Or they find religious leaders hypocritical.

Or maybe they're just bored. Believe me, I've heard plenty of homilies that have put me to sleep, sometimes literally. As the Catholic priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley once wrote, sometimes the question is not why so many Catholics leave the church—it's why they stay.

Catholics may be turned off by the church's teachings on a particular moral question, or its stance on a political question, or by the scandal of clergy sex abuse. Consequently, while they still believe in God, they no longer consider themselves part of the church. They are sometimes called “lapsed,” “fallen away,” or “recovering” Catholics. But, as one friend said after the sex abuse crisis, “I didn't fall away from the church. It fell away from *me*.”

Though they keep their distance from churches, synagogues, or mosques, many people in this group are still firm believers. Often they find solace in the religious practices they learned as children. Just as often they long for a more formal way to worship God in their lives.

One strength of this group is a healthy independence that enables them to see things in a fresh way—something that their own religious community often desperately needs. Those on the “outside,” who are not bound by the usual restrictions on what is “appropriate” and “not appropriate” to say within the community, can often speak more honestly.

The main danger for this group, however, is a perfectionism that sets up any organized religion for failure.

Not long ago, a friend stopped attending his family's church. My friend is an intelligent and compassionate man who believes in God and whose parents had deep roots in Episcopalianism. But he believed his local church was too aligned with the affluent. So he decided to search for a community that recognized the place of the poor in the world.

After he left his church, he toyed with the idea of joining the local Catholic church, which he noticed many of the poor attended on Sundays. But my friend disagreed with their prohibition on ordaining women. So he rejected Catholicism.

Next he experimented with Buddhism, but he found it impossible to reconcile his belief in a personal God, and his devotion to Jesus Christ, with the Buddhist worldview.

Finally, he ended up at the local Unitarian church, which initially seemed to suit him. He appreciated their broad-minded Christian-based spirituality and commitment to social justice, as well as their welcome of people who feel unwelcome in other churches. But he eventually ran into a problem: the Unitarians didn't espouse a clear enough belief system for my friend. In the end, he decided to belong to no church. Now he stays at home on Sundays.

My friend's experience reminded me that the search for a perfect religious community is a futile one. As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "The first and most elementary test of one's call to the religious life—whether as a Jesuit, Franciscan, Cistercian or Carthusian—is the willingness to accept life in a community in which everybody is more or less imperfect." That holds for *any* religious organization.

This is not to excuse all the problems, imperfections, and even sinfulness of religious organizations. Rather, it is a realistic admission that as long as we're human, we will be imperfect. It's also a reminder that for those on the path of independence—believers who have left organized religion—the search for a perfect religious community may be one without end.

The Path of Disbelief

Those traveling along the path of disbelief not only find that organized religion holds no appeal (even if they sometimes find its services and rituals comforting), but have also arrived at an intellectual conclusion that God may not, does not, or cannot exist. Often they

seek proof for God's existence, and finding intense suffering, they reject the theistic world.

The cardinal benefit of this group is the absence of the bland reassurances of religion for granted. They have thought more deeply about God and religion than most. Likewise, sometimes the most selfless are the most atheists or agnostics. Some of the hardest work I did in my time working with refugees in East Africa was with them. The "secular saint" is real.

They also have a knack for detecting hypocrisy. They are swiftness: a religious-balance detector. Tell a person that suffering is part of God's mysterious plan, and they will unquestioningly, and he will rightly challenge you. One of my college friends practices his faith by asking questions that have kept me on my toes for the rest of my life. Asking him about "God's will," and you will find the end of a pointed lecture on personal responsibility.

The main danger for this group is that they want God's presence to be proven solely in an objective way. If something profound happens in their environment, that touches them deeply, they reject the possibility that it is a sign of God's activity. Their intellect may be strong, but off their hearts to experiences of God's presence. They are unwilling to attribute to God anything that is not an obvious example of God's presence.

It's like the story of the atheist caught in a flood. He figures that the flood threatening his house is a test to conclusively whether God exists. So he says to himself, "I will ask him for help, and he will save me. When I hear the radio advising listeners to move to higher ground, if there is a God, he will save me, he thinks. Next he hears his door to warn him to evacuate. "If there is a God, he says to the firefighter. When the floodwaters reach the second floor. The coast guard boat

s church, he toyed with the idea of joining the church, which he noticed many of the poor attended. My friend disagreed with their prohibition on orphans and rejected Catholicism.

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He ended up at the local Unitarian church, which initially he appreciated their broad-minded Christianity and commitment to social justice, as well as their acceptance of people who feel unwelcome in other churches. But he had a problem: the Unitarians didn't espouse a clear path for my friend. In the end, he decided to belong to the church but he stays at home on Sundays.

My experience reminded me that the search for a perfect religion is a futile one. As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "The first and most essential element of the religious life—whether as a Jesuit, a Benedictine or Carthusian—is the willingness to accept the condition in which everybody is more or less imperfect." This is the nature of any religious organization.

Don't excuse all the problems, imperfections, and even failures of religious organizations. Rather, it is a realistic admission: we're human, we will be imperfect. It's also a realistic goal on the path of independence—believers who seek a religion—the search for a perfect religious community without end.

The Path of Disbelief

Along the path of disbelief not only find that organizations have no appeal (even if they sometimes find its serenity comforting), but have also arrived at an intellectual conclusion: God may not, does not, or cannot exist. Often they

seek proof for God's existence, and finding none, or encountering intense suffering, they reject the theistic worldview completely.

The cardinal benefit of this group is that they take none of the bland reassurances of religion for granted. Sometimes they have thought more deeply about God and religion than some believers have. Likewise, sometimes the most selfless people in our world are atheists or agnostics. Some of the hardest working aid workers I met in my time working with refugees in East Africa were nonbelievers. The "secular saint" is real.

They also have a knack for detecting hypocrisy, cant, or lazy answers: a religious-baloney detector. Tell a person in this group that suffering is part of God's mysterious plan and needs to be accepted unquestioningly, and he will rightly challenge you to explain yourself. One of my college friends practices his atheism religiously; his questions have kept me on my toes for the last thirty years. Try telling him about "God's will," and you will find yourself on the receiving end of a pointed lecture on personal responsibility.

The main danger for this group is that they sometimes expect God's presence to be proven solely in an intellectual way. When something profound happens in their emotional lives, something that touches them deeply, they reject the possibility that it could be a sign of God's activity. Their intellect may become a wall that closes off their hearts to experiences of God's presence. They may also be unwilling to attribute to God anything that the believer might see as an obvious example of God's presence.

It's like the story of the atheist caught in a flood. The fellow figures that the flood threatening his house is the chance to prove conclusively whether God exists. So he says to himself, *If there is a God, I will ask him for help, and he will save me.* When he hears a warning on the radio advising listeners to move to higher ground, he ignores it. *If there is a God, he will save me,* he thinks. Next, a firefighter knocks on his door to warn him to evacuate. "If there is a God, he will save me," he says to the firefighter. When the floodwaters rise, the man climbs to the second floor. The coast guard boat motors by his window and

offers him rescue. "If there is a God, he will save me," he says and refuses help from the coast guard.

Finally, he ends up on the roof, with the waters rising around him. A police helicopter hovers over the house and drops a rope to climb. "If there is a God, he will save me!" he shouts over the roar of the helicopter's blades.

Suddenly a giant wave sweeps over him, and the man drowns and finds himself in heaven. When God comes to welcome him, the atheist is first surprised. And then furious. "Why didn't you save me?" he asks.

"What do you mean?" says God. "I sent the firefighter, the coast guard, and the police officer, and you still wouldn't listen!"

The Path of Return

This path gets more crowded every year. People in this group typically begin life in a religious family but drift away from their faith. After a childhood in which they were encouraged (or forced) to attend religious services, they find them either tiresome or irrelevant or both. Religion remains distant, though oddly appealing.

Then something reignites their curiosity about God. Maybe they've achieved some financial or professional success and ask, "Is that all there is?" Or after the death of a parent, they start to wonder about their own mortality. Or their children ask about God, awakening questions that have lain dormant within themselves for years. "Who is God, Mommy?"

Thus begins a tentative journey back to their faith—though it may not be the same faith they knew as children. Perhaps a new tradition speaks more clearly to them. Perhaps they return to their original religion but in a different, and more committed, way than when they were young.

That's not surprising. As I mentioned, you would hardly consider yourself an educated adult if you ended your academic training as a

child. Yet many believers cease their religious practices and expect it to carry them through adulthood. Many often find that they need to reeducate themselves about their faith in a mature way.

When I was a boy, for instance, I used to pray to the Great Problem Solver who would fix all my problems. It didn't work hard enough. Let me get an A on my social studies test. I did well in math. Better yet, let tomorrow be a sunny day.

If God was all good, I reasoned, then he would solve my problems. What possible reason could God have for not solving my problems?

As I grew older, the model of God as the Great Problem Solver collapsed—primarily because God didn't solve all of my problems. I prayed and prayed and prayed, but my problems still weren't solved. *Why not?* I wondered. *Why not me?* My adolescent narcissism led to some serious self-reflection. I began to consider the possibility that God didn't exist.

This lukewarm agnosticism came to a head during my college days at the University of Pennsylvania. During my college years at Penn, my friends and I spent many late-night sessions loudly about religion (usually after too many drinks). Those late-night sessions raised doubts about the value of prayer. I had prayed when I was young. But at the time, I had doubts and unconnected questions.

They coalesced when my freshman-year friend died in an automobile accident during our senior year. Brad was one of my closest friends, and his death was almost too much for me.

At Brad's funeral, on a humid spring day in a cemetery outside of Washington, DC, I sat in a taxi cab, surrounded by Brad's shattered family and friends. I thought about the absurdity of believing in God and praying to him. By the end of the service I had decided that I would never pray to who would act so cruelly. The Great Problem Solver didn't solve my problems but creating them.

“If there is a God, he will save me,” he says and the coast guard.
 up on the roof, with the waters rising around the helicopter hovers over the house and drops a rope to God, he will save me!” he shouts over the roar of the engines.
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The Path of Return

crowded every year. People in this group typically grew up in a religious family but drift away from their faith. In childhood, they were encouraged (or forced) to attend church services, they find them either tiresome or irrelevant. The church remains distant, though oddly appealing. A crisis, such as a job loss, reignites their curiosity about God. Maybe after some financial or professional success and ask, “Is there something after the death of a parent, they start to wonder about mortality. Or their children ask about God, awakening a faith that have lain dormant within themselves for years. “Why am I here?”
 A tentative journey back to their faith—though it is not the same faith they knew as children. Perhaps a new understanding comes more clearly to them. Perhaps they return to their faith in a different, and more committed, way than before.
 As I mentioned, you would hardly consider a person an adult if you ended your academic training as a

child. Yet many believers cease their religious education as children, and expect it to carry them through adulthood. People in this group often find that they need to reeducate themselves to understand their faith in a mature way.

When I was a boy, for instance, I used to think of God as the Great Problem Solver who would fix all my problems if I just prayed hard enough. Let me get an A on my social studies test. Let me do well in math. Better yet, let tomorrow be a snow day.

If God was all good, I reasoned, then he would answer my prayers. What possible reason could God have for *not* answering them?

As I grew older, the model of God as the Great Problem Solver collapsed—primarily because God didn’t seem interested in solving all of my problems. I prayed and prayed and prayed, and all my problems still weren’t solved. *Why not?* I wondered. Didn’t God care about me? My adolescent narcissism led to some serious doubts, which led me to consider the possibility that God didn’t exist.

This lukewarm agnosticism came to a boil during my college days at the University of Pennsylvania. During freshman and sophomore years at Penn, my friends and I spent many late nights arguing loudly about religion (usually after too many beers or too much pot). Those late-night sessions raised doubts about the God to whom I had prayed when I was young. But at the time they were just random doubts and unconnected questions.

They coalesced when my freshman-year roommate was killed in an automobile accident during our senior year. Brad was one of my closest friends, and his death was almost too much to bear.

At Brad’s funeral, on a humid spring day in a wealthy suburb outside of Washington, DC, I sat in a tasteful Episcopal church, surrounded by Brad’s shattered family and my grieving friends, and thought about the absurdity of believing in a God who would allow this. By the end of the service I had decided not to believe in a God who would act so cruelly. The Great Problem Solver wasn’t solving problems but creating them.

My newfound atheism was invigorating. Not only did I feel like a person with a first-rate intellect, I was proud to have rejected something that obviously had not worked. Why believe in a God who either couldn't or wouldn't prevent suffering? Atheism was not only intellectually respectable but also had some practical benefits: I now had my Sunday mornings free.

So I firmly stepped onto the path of disbelief.

This journey continued for a few months until a conversation with a mutual friend of Brad, Jacque (she pronounced it "Jackie") came from a small town outside of Chicago and was what my friends derisively called a "fundamentalist," though we had scant idea of what that meant. (It meant that her faith informed her life.) Jacque had lived in the same dorm with Brad and me during freshman year. Though wildly different from Brad in outlook and interests, the two became close.

After an accounting class one day, standing in a snowfall outside of our old freshman dorm, I told Jacque how angry I was at God, and how I had decided I would no longer go to church. My comments were flung at her like a challenge. *You're the believer*, I thought, *explain this*.

"Well," she said softly, "I've been thanking God for Brad's life." I can still remember standing in the cold and having my breath taken away by her answer. Rather than arguing about suffering, she was telling me that there were other ways to relate to God, ways other than as the Great Problem Solver.

Jacque's response nudged me onto the path of return. She hadn't answered my question about suffering. Rather, her words reminded me that the question of suffering (or the "mystery of evil" as theologians say) is not the only question to ask about God. Her reply said that you can live with the question of suffering and still believe in God—much as a child can trust a parent even when he doesn't fully understand all of the parent's ways. It also reminded me that there are other questions that are equally important—such as "Who is God?" Not being able to answer one question does not mean that others are not equally valid. Her answer opened a window onto another vista of faith.

Yet I was still stuck with a big question: if the Great Problem Solver, the God of my youth, who was

Not until I entered the Jesuits and began to discover a different kind of God—a God who was *with* you, a God who took a personal interest in your life, a God who said that all your problems were solved—did life start to make sense. That's not to say I ever found an entirely satisfying answer to the mystery of suffering—or for why my friend died at twenty-one. But it helped me understand the importance of my relationship with God, even during difficult times.

When I was a novice, one of my spiritual directors was the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, who coined the term "illusory religion." The maxim of "illusory religion" was "Fear not; trust in God and He will see that no evil will happen to you." "Real religion," said Macmurray, was a different maxim: "Fear not; the things you are afraid of will happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of."

The Path of Exploration

A few years ago, I worked with an Off-Broadway theater that was producing a new play about the relationship between Jesus and Judas called *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Working with the actor who would play Judas, as well as the director, I was invited to help the cast understand the subject material. In time they asked me to be a "consultant" for the play. This isn't as strange as it sounds (suits have historically been active in theater, and actors have been actively in their schools from the earliest days of theater) later on.)

Over the course of six months, I found myself talking to the actors not simply about Jesus and Judas but also about their lives, answering questions prompted by our freedom to ask about the Gospels, about sin and forgiveness, a

atheism was invigorating. Not only did I feel like a high-rate intellect, I was proud to have rejected something that had not worked. Why believe in a God who wouldn't prevent suffering? Atheism was not only comfortable but also had some practical benefits: I now had my earnings free.

I dropped onto the path of disbelief. I continued for a few months until a conversation with Brad. Jacque (she pronounced it "Jackie") came to the outside of Chicago and was what my friends derisively called a "fundamentalist," though we had scant idea of what that meant (that her faith informed her life.) Jacque had lived in Chicago with Brad and me during freshman year. Though wildly different in outlook and interests, the two became close. During a writing class one day, standing in a snowfall outside my dorm, I told Jacque how angry I was at God, and she said I would no longer go to church. My comments were a challenge. *You're the believer, I thought, explain this.* She said softly, "I've been thanking God for Brad's life." I was standing in the cold and having my breath taken away. Rather than arguing about suffering, she was saying there were other ways to relate to God, ways other than the Great Problem Solver.

She nudged me onto the path of return. She hadn't asked a question about suffering. Rather, her words reminded me of the question of suffering (or the "mystery of evil" as theologians call it) the only question to ask about God. Her reply said that she was wrestling with the question of suffering and still believe in a God. A child can trust a parent even when he doesn't fully understand the parent's ways. It also reminded me that there are questions that are equally important—such as "Who is able to answer one question does not mean that the answer is usually valid. Her answer opened a window onto another path.

Yet I was still stuck with a big question: if God wasn't the Great Problem Solver, the God of my youth, who was He? Or She? Or It?

Not until I entered the Jesuits and began hearing about a different kind of God—a God who was *with* you in your suffering, a God who took a personal interest in your life, even if you didn't feel that all your problems were solved—did life started to make more sense. That's not to say I ever found an entirely satisfying answer for the mystery of suffering—or for why my friend's life was ended at twenty-one. But it helped me understand the importance of being in relationship with God, even during difficult times.

When I was a novice, one of my spiritual directors quoted the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, who contrasted "real religion" and "illusory religion." The maxim of "illusory religion" is as follows: "Fear not; trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you." "Real religion," said Macmurray, has a different maxim: "Fear not; the things you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of."

The Path of Exploration

A few years ago, I worked with an Off-Broadway acting company that was producing a new play about the relationship between Jesus and Judas called *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. After some meetings with the actor who would play Judas, as well as the playwright and the director, I was invited to help the cast better understand the subject material. In time they asked me to serve as "theological consultant" for the play. This isn't as strange as it may seem: the Jesuits have historically been active in theater, having used it extensively in their schools from the earliest days. (More about "Jesuit theater" later on.)

Over the course of six months, I found myself talking with the actors not simply about Jesus and Judas but also about their spiritual lives, answering questions prompted by our freewheeling discussions about the Gospels, about sin and forgiveness, and about faith.

Several of the actors had toggled between one religious tradition and another, seeking something that would “fit.” One actor, named Yetta, who played Mary Magdalene, told me that her mother was Catholic and her father was Jewish. They decided to let her choose her own religion when she was grown. “But,” she said, “I haven’t chosen yet.” (By the way, when I quote people in this book, or tell their stories, it is with their permission.)

My time with the actors was one of not only discovering the theater but also meeting people who were traveling along a path I hadn’t encountered before. They were on the path of exploration.

Given their profession, this was not surprising. A good actor often researches a new role by spending time with a person from a particular background. An actor prepping for a role in a police drama, for instance, will hang out with real-life police officers. So the idea of “exploration” comes naturally to them. Stepping into another person’s shoes for a time is not that different from entering into another religious tradition for a time.

Others—not just actors—more settled in their religious beliefs often find that their own spiritual practices are enhanced through interactions with other religious traditions. Several years ago I was astonished by the richness of my prayer one Sunday morning in a Quaker meeting house near my parents’ home outside Philadelphia. While I had ample experience praying contemplatively on my own, and worshipping together during Catholic Masses, the Quakers’ “gathered silence” (praying silently *together*) was a type of contemplation I’d never before imagined. Their tradition enriched my own.

I have wandered freely in mystical traditions that are not religious and have been profoundly influenced by them. It is to my Church, however, that I keep returning, for she is my spiritual home.

—Anthony de Mello, S.J. (1931–1987)

Exploration comes naturally to Americans. It is a theme celebrated not only in U.S. history but also in the heroes of literature: Huckleberry Finn is an explorer. So are the heroines of the novels of Jack London and Walt Whitman—but two favorite authors. Our homegrown heroes, especially the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Thoreau—were inner explorers. “Afoot and light hearted, I take to the open road,” wrote Walt Whitman in “I, Too, Sing America,” “The world before me, / The long brown path before me, / Beginning of a journey, / The end of a journey, / I choose.”

Exploration comes naturally in Americans who are off by their childhood faith, or by the failings of their parents, and lacking extensive religious training, many Americans search for a religion that “fits” to embark on a quest—i.e., a pilgrimage.

The benefit of walking along the path of exploration is that after a serious search, you may discover a tradition that deepens your understanding of God, your desires for community, and your own personality. Likewise, returning to your own tradition may give you a renewed appreciation for your own faith. Explorers may also be more grateful for what they have. They are not as likely to take their communities for granted. A grateful pilgrim is the one who has finished the journey.

The pitfall for this path is similar to the one for the path of dependence: the danger of not settling for any tradition that is perfect. An even greater danger for explorers is that they may find one religious tradition because it doesn’t suit them, and then someone who is supposed to satisfy their needs finds a “pocket-size God,” small enough to fit in a pocket when God doesn’t suit you (for example, a priest who says things that you would rather not hear, or a pocket only when convenient).

Another danger is a lack of commitment. A person who becomes one of exploration—constant sampling—

actors had toggled between one religious tradition and another, finding something that would "fit." One actor, named Mary Magdalene, told me that her mother was Catholic and her father was Jewish. They decided to let her choose her own path when she was grown. "But," she said, "I haven't chosen yet. The way, when I quote people in this book, or tell you something, with their permission.)

For many of the actors was one of not only discovering the theme of the acting people who were traveling along a path I hadn't traveled before. They were on the path of exploration.

In the acting profession, this was not surprising. A good actor discovers a new role by spending time with a person from a different background. An actor prepping for a role in a police drama, for example, will hang out with real-life police officers. So "preparation" comes naturally to them. Stepping into another role for a time is not that different from entering a new religious tradition for a time.

For most actors—more settled in their religious beliefs and practices—their own spiritual practices are enhanced through exposure to other religious traditions. Several years ago I was struck by the richness of my prayer one Sunday morning in a church in a house near my parents' home outside Philadelphia. My experience praying contemplatively on my own, and then together during Catholic Masses, the Quakers' silent prayer (praying silently *together*) was a type of contemplation I had never imagined. Their tradition enriched my own.

Some actors are freed freely in mystical traditions that are not readily accessible. I have been profoundly influenced by them. It is not surprising, however, that I keep returning, for she is my friend.

—Anthony de Mello, S.J. (1931–1987)

Exploration comes naturally to Americans in particular and is a theme celebrated not only in U.S. history but in our great works of literature: Huckleberry Finn is an explorer. So are the heroes and heroines of the novels of Jack London and Willa Cather, to name a few, but two favorite authors. Our homegrown religious writers—especially the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—were inner explorers. "Afoot and lighthearted, I take to the open road," wrote Walt Whitman, "Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose."

Exploration comes naturally in American faith as well. Turned off by their childhood faith, or by the failings of organized religion, and lacking extensive religious training, many Americans searching for a religion that "fits" embark on a quest—itsself a spiritual metaphor.

The benefit of walking along the path of exploration is plain. After a serious search, you may discover a tradition ideally suited to your understanding of God, your desires for community, and even to your own personality. Likewise, returning to your original community may give you a renewed appreciation for your "spiritual home." Explorers may also be more grateful for what they have found and are not as likely to take their communities for granted. The most grateful pilgrim is the one who has finished the longest journey.

The pitfall for this path is similar to the one for the path of independence: the danger of not settling for any tradition because none is perfect. An even greater danger for explorers is not settling on any one religious tradition because it doesn't suit *them*: God may become someone who is supposed to satisfy their needs. God becomes what one writer called a "pocket-size God," small enough to put in your pocket when God doesn't suit you (for example, when the Scriptures say things that you would rather not hear) and take out of your pocket only when convenient.

Another danger is a lack of commitment. Your entire life may become one of exploration—constant sampling, spiritual grazing.

And when the path becomes the goal, rather than God, people may ultimately find themselves unfulfilled, confused, lost, and maybe even a little sad.

The Path of Confusion

This final path crosses all the other ones at various points. People on the path of confusion run hot and cold with their childhood faith—finding it relatively easy to believe in God at times, almost impossible at others. They haven't "fallen away," but they've not stayed connected either. They cry out to God in prayer and then wonder why there doesn't seem to be an answer. They intuit God's presence during important moments, and perhaps even during religious services, but find themselves bothered by the problems of belonging to a church, synagogue, or mosque. They may pray from time to time, particularly when in dire need, and they may go to services on key holidays.

But for this group, finding God is a mystery, a worry, or a problem.

The main benefit of this path is that it often helps people to fine-tune their approach to their childhood faith. Unlike those who consider themselves clearly religious or clearly nonreligious, these people have not yet made up their minds, and so they are constantly refining their ideas about a religious commitment.

But confusion can lapse into laziness. Avoiding worship services because of a particular criticism can lead to leaving organized religion entirely because it's too much work, or because it takes too much energy to belong to a group that demands, say, charity and forgiveness.

Much of my adult life, before entering the Jesuits, was spent on this path. As a boy, I was raised in a loving family with a lukewarm Catholic background. My family went to church regularly, but we didn't engage in those practices that mark very religious Catholics—saying grace at meals, speaking regularly about God, praying before

going to bed, and attending Catholic schools. I was increasingly confused about God.

After Jacque's mysterious answer moved me, by chance, I returned to church, but in a desultory way. I didn't know exactly what, or who, I believed in. So for several years the Life Force was replaced by a more amorphous God, the Life Force, God the Other, God the Far-Away. These are valid images of God, I had no idea that God was *not* those abstract ideas. And I figured that this was the way until I died.

Then, at age twenty-six, I came home one day and turned on the television set. After graduation, I had worked for General Electric but was beginning to grow bored with the work. After six years of working late at night and I had also started to develop stress-related stomach problems, I was wondering how much more I could take.

On television that night was a documentary about Thomas Merton, a man who had turned his back on a conventional Trappist monastery in the early 1940s. Sometime later a picture on his face spoke to me: his countenance, the way he looked to me seemed unknown, or at least forgotten. I was interested that the next day I purchased and read his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Gradually, I discovered within myself a desire for a life similar to what Thomas Merton had done; not a life in a monastery (since I'm too talkative) but somehow a more contemplative, more religious, life. That experience led me onto the path of confusion and onto the path of the Jesuits.

THOSE ARE THE SIX paths on which many seem to wander. St. Ignatius have to say to people on each of them: "Finding God? The answer is: plenty."

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The Path of Confusion

Like all the other ones at various points. People often can run hot and cold with their childhood faith—easy to believe in God at times, almost impossible at others. They haven't "fallen away," but they've not stayed. They cry out to God in prayer and then wonder if the answer seems to be an answer. They intuit God's presence in certain moments, and perhaps even during religious services. They feel themselves bothered by the problems of belonging to a church, mosque, or synagogue. They may pray from time to time, and they may go to services on key

moments, finding God is a mystery, a worry, or a

benefit of this path is that it often helps people to return to their childhood faith. Unlike those who are clearly religious or clearly nonreligious, these people have not made up their minds, and so they are constantly questioning about a religious commitment.

They can lapse into laziness. Avoiding worship services and particular criticism can lead to leaving organized religion because it's too much work, or because it takes too long to get to a group that demands, say, charity and for-

my childhood life, before entering the Jesuits, was spent on prayer. I was raised in a loving family with a lukewarm faith. My family went to church regularly, but we didn't do those practices that mark very religious Catholics—fasting, speaking regularly about God, praying before

going to bed, and attending Catholic schools. And in college I grew increasingly confused about God.

After Jacques's mysterious answer moved me to give God another chance, I returned to church, but in a desultory way. I wasn't sure exactly what, or who, I believed in. So for several years God the Problem Solver was replaced by a more amorphous spiritual concept: God the Life Force, God the Other, God the Far-Away One. While these are valid images of God, I had no idea that God could be anything *but* those abstract ideas. And I figured that things would stay that way until I died.

Then, at age twenty-six, I came home one night after work and turned on the television set. After graduation, I had taken a job with General Electric but was beginning to grow dissatisfied with the work. After six years of working late at night and on the weekends, I had also started to develop stress-related stomach problems and was wondering how much more I could take.

On television that night was a documentary about Thomas Merton, a man who had turned his back on a dissolute life to enter a Trappist monastery in the early 1940s. Something about the expression on his face spoke to me: his countenance radiated a peace that to me seemed unknown, or at least forgotten. The show was so interesting that the next day I purchased and began reading Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Gradually, I discovered within myself a desire to do something similar to what Thomas Merton had done; maybe not join a monastery (since I'm too talkative) but somehow lead a more contemplative, more religious, life. That experience helped me to step off the path of confusion and onto the path of belief, which led to the Jesuits.

THOSE ARE THE SIX paths on which many seem to travel. What does St. Ignatius have to say to people on each of those paths about finding God? The answer is: plenty.

gnatius is an invitation to those who have always believed in God but not in religion, who have been coming back to God, who are exploring, and Ignatius's approach meets you on your path and leads you to God.

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

The question of how to find God, a digression on the difference between religion and spirituality. Everybody seems to have an opinion—your college roommate to the person next to yours to the subject of every other celebrity. “Spiritual” is fashionable, “religious” is unfashionable. It is usually expressed as follows: “I’m spiritual but not religious.” It is referred to by the acronym SBNR.

Many people who describe themselves as SBNR wonder if the Jesuits might attract more people if they were “spiritual but Not Religious Exercises.”

Examples like this: being religious means abiding by the established dogmas, and being the tool of an oppressor doesn't allow you to think for yourself (which is what many thinking believers, like St. Thomas Aquinas, Simonides, Dorothy Day, and Reinhold Niebuhr). Being religious is often bigoted and prejudicial—so goes the thinking—of the human spirit (which would have surprised even St. Thomas, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, St. Teresa of Avila, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.).

Several contemporary authors contend, religion is the cause of social evils, responsible for all the wars and suffering in the world.

Religion is responsible for many ills in the modern world. A brief history: among them, the persecution of Jews, the Inquisition, not to mention the religious fanaticism that leads to terrorism.

You can add to this list smaller things: your judgmental neighbor who loudly tells you how often he helps out at church, your holier-than-thou relative who trumpets how often she reads the Bible, or that annoying guy at work who keeps telling you that belief in Jesus is sure to bring you amazing financial success.

There is a human and sinful side to religion since religions are human organizations, and therefore prone to sin. And, frankly, people within religious organizations know this better than those outside of them.

Some say that on balance religion is found wanting. Still, I would stack up against the negatives the positive aspects: traditions of love, forgiveness, and charity as well as the more tangible outgrowths of thousands of faith-based organizations that care for the poor, like Catholic Charities or the vast network of Catholic hospitals and schools that care for poor and immigrant populations. Think too of generous men and women like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. Catherine of Siena, Mother Teresa, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Speaking of Dr. King, you might add abolition, women's suffrage, and the civil rights movements, all of which were founded on explicitly religious principles. Add to that list the billions of believers who have found in their own religious traditions not only comfort but also a moral voice urging them to live selfless lives and to challenge the status quo.

And Jesus of Nazareth. Remember him? Though he often challenged the religious conventions of his day, he was a deeply religious man. (This is something of an understatement.)

By the way, atheism doesn't have a perfect record either. In his book *No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers*, the writer Michael Novak points out that while many atheist thinkers urge us to question everything, especially the record of organized religion, atheists often fail to question their own record. Think of the cruelty and bloodshed perpetrated, just in the twentieth century, by totalitarian regimes that have professed “scientific atheism.” Stalinist Russia comes to mind.

On balance, I think religion comes out on top. And when I think about the maleficent effects of religion, I remember the English novelist Evelyn Waugh, a dazzling writer who was by many accounts a nasty person. (He once wrote to his wife, "I know you lead a dull life now. . . . But that is no reason to make your letters as dull as your life. . . . Please grasp that.") One of Waugh's friends, Nancy Mitford, once expressed astonishment that he could be so mean-spirited and a Christian. "You can't imagine," said Waugh, "how much worse I should be if I were not religious."

Still, it's not surprising that, given all the problems with organized religion, many people would say, "I'm not religious," adding, "I'm serious about living a moral life, maybe even one that centers on God, but I'm my own person."

Spiritual, on the other hand, is taken to mean that, freed from unnecessary dogma, you can be yourself before God. The term may also imply that you have sampled a variety of religious beliefs that you have integrated into your life. You meditate at a Buddhist temple (which is great); participate in Seders with Jewish friends at Passover (great too); sing in a gospel choir at a local Baptist church (great again); and go to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at a Catholic church (also great).

You find what works for you, but you don't subscribe to any one church: that would be too confining. Besides, there's no one creed that represents exactly what you believe.

But there's a problem. While "spiritual" is obviously healthy, "not religious" may be another way of saying that faith is something between you and God. And while faith is a question of you and God, it's not *just* a question of you and God. Because this would mean that you, alone, are relating to God. And that means there's no one to suggest when you might be off track.

We all tend to think we're correct about most things, and spiritual matters are no exception. Not belonging to a religious community means less of a chance of being challenged by a tradition of belief

and experience. It also means less chance to be guided, seeing only part of the picture or even

Let's consider a person who wants to follow her own path. Perhaps she has heard that if she follows her own path to financial success—a popular idea today. Were she to leave the mainstream Christian community, though, she would be missing out on the wisdom of a community, she may gravely misunderstand the view of Christianity. Once she falls on hard times, she may drop Christ, who has ceased to meet her needs.

Despite our best efforts to be spiritual, we often find ourselves when we do, it's helpful to have the wisdom of a community.

This reminds me of a passage from a book called *Heart*, written by Robert Bellah, a sociologist who interviewed his colleagues, in which they interviewed a woman about her religious beliefs. "I believe in God," she said. "I'm a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. It has carried me a long way. It's Sheilism. Just my own path."

More problematic than Sheilism are spiritual paths that are focused on the self, with no place for humility, selflessness, or responsibility for the community. Certain people find their goal not in God, or even the greater good, but in self-improvement—a valuable goal—but one that may be self-centered.

Religion can provide a check to my tendencies. I am not the center of the universe, that I have all the answers, that I know better than anyone about God, and that God works through me.

By the same token, religious institutions must be held accountable. And here the prophets are called to account. And here the prophets are called to see the failures, weaknesses, and plain old failures of traditional religion, play a critical role. Like individuals, when challenged, religious communities can often

think religion comes out on top. And when I think of the effects of religion, I remember the English novelist Henry James, a dazzling writer who was by many accounts a dull man. He once wrote to his wife, "I know you lead a dull life. There is no reason to make your letters as dull as your life is. (That's what you do.)" One of Waugh's friends, Nancy Mitford, once said to him, "I wish you could be so mean-spirited and so much more so. I can't imagine," said Waugh, "how much worse I would be if I were not religious."

It's surprising that, given all the problems with organized religion, people would say, "I'm not religious," adding, "I'm living a moral life, maybe even one that centers on the needs of the person."

On the other hand, being spiritual is taken to mean that, freed from the constraints of organized religion, you can be yourself before God. The term "spiritual" is used because you have sampled a variety of religious beliefs and practices and integrated them into your life. You meditate at a Buddhist retreat; participate in Seders with Jewish friends at home; sing in a gospel choir at a local Baptist church; attend Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at a Catholic church.

It works for you, but you don't subscribe to any one religion. It can be too confining. Besides, there's no one creed that you have to live by, only what you believe.

One problem. While "spiritual" is obviously healthy, it can be another way of saying that faith is something you do on your own. And while faith is a question of you and God, it can also be a question of you and God. Because this would mean that you are talking to God. And that means there's no one to check you. You might be off track.

When we think we're correct about most things, and spirituality is the exception. Not belonging to a religious community means a lack of chance of being challenged by a tradition of belief

and experience. It also means less chance to see that you are misguided, seeing only part of the picture or even that you are wrong.

Let's consider a person who wants to follow Jesus Christ on her own. Perhaps she has heard that if she follows Christ, she will enjoy financial success—a popular idea today. Were she part of a mainstream Christian community, though, she would be reminded that suffering is part of the life of even the most devout Christian. Without the wisdom of a community, she may gravitate toward a skewed view of Christianity. Once she falls on hard times financially, she may drop Christ, who has ceased to meet her personal needs.

Despite our best efforts to be spiritual, we make mistakes. And when we do, it's helpful to have the wisdom of a religious tradition.

This reminds me of a passage from a book called *Habits of the Heart*, written by Robert Bellah, a sociologist of religion, and other colleagues, in which they interviewed a woman named Sheila about her religious beliefs. "I believe in God," she said. "I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."

More problematic than Sheilaism are spiritualities entirely focused on the self, with no place for humility, self-critique, or a sense of responsibility for the community. Certain New Age movements find their goal not in God, or even the greater good, but in self-improvement—a valuable goal—but one that may degenerate into selfishness.

Religion can provide a check to my tendency to think that I am the center of the universe, that I have all the answers, that I know better than anyone about God, and that God speaks most clearly through me.

By the same token, religious institutions need themselves to be called to account. And here the prophets among us, who are able to see the failures, weaknesses, and plain old sinfulness of institutional religion, play a critical role. Like individuals who are never challenged, religious communities can often get things tragically

wrong, convinced that they are doing “God’s will.” (Think of the Salem witch trials, among other examples.) They might even encourage us to become complacent in our judgments. Unreflective religion can sometimes incite people to make even *worse* mistakes than they would on their own. Thus, those prophetic voices calling their communities to continual self-critique are always difficult for the institution to hear, but nonetheless necessary. Ignatius, for example, exercised a prophetic role by asking Jesuits not to seek high clerical office in the church—like that of bishop, archbishop, or cardinal. In fact, Jesuits make a promise not to “ambition” for high office even within their own order. In this way, Ignatius not only tried to prevent careerism among the Jesuits, but also spoke a word of prophecy to the clerical culture rampant in the Catholic Church of his time.

It’s a healthy tension: the wisdom of our religious traditions provides us with a corrective for our propensity to think that we have all the answers; and prophetic individuals moderate the natural propensity of institutions to resist change and growth. As with many aspects of the spiritual life, you need to find life in the tension.

Isaac Hecker was a nineteenth-century convert to Catholicism who became a priest and founded the American religious order known as the Paulists. He may have summed it up best. Religion, said Hecker, helps you to “connect and correct.” You are invited into a community to connect with one another and with a tradition. At the same time, you are corrected when you need to be. And you may be called to correct your own community—though a special kind of discernment and humility is required in those cases.

Religion can lead people to do terrible things. At its best, though, religion modifies our natural tendency to believe that we have all the answers. So despite what many detractors say, and despite the arrogance that sometimes infects religious groups, religion at its best introduces humility into your life.

Religion also reflects the social dimension of human beings. Human beings naturally desire to be with others, and this desire extends to worship. It’s natural to want to gather with other people who share your dreams and to work with others to fulfill the dreams of your community.

Experiencing God also comes through prayer and reflection within the community. Sure, God communicates with us in private, intimate moments—as in prayer or reading—but God also enters into relationships with us through a faith community. Finding God often happens in a community—with a “we” as often as an “I.” For a community is a church, a synagogue, or a mosque, or any other religion.

Finally, religion means that your understanding of your spiritual life can more easily transcend your imagination and imagination. Do you imagine God as a distant, abstract One? It helps you become a more moral and loving person. A religious tradition can enrich your spiritual imagination in ways you might not be able to discover by yourself.

Here’s an example: one of my favorite images of God is the God of Surprises, which I first encountered in a book of my own idea of God at the time was limited to the One, so it was liberating to hear about a God who waits for us with wonderful things. It’s a playful image of God. But I would have never come up with it if it hadn’t come to me from David Donovan, my spiritual director. I read it in a book of that same title, by an Englishman, Gerard W. Hughes, who borrowed it from an image of God by Jesuit Karl Rahner.

That image was amplified when I read the great modern spiritual novels, *Mariette in the Valley*, by an award-winning writer who is also an ordained priest. He penned the story of the religious experiences of

at they are doing "God's will." (Think of the among other examples.) They might even be complacent in our judgments. Unreflective ones incite people to make even *worse* mistakes their own. Thus, those prophetic voices call for continual self-critique are always difficult to hear, but nonetheless necessary. Ignatius, for a prophetic role by asking Jesuits not to seek in the church—like that of bishop, archbishop, Jesuits make a promise not to "ambition" for within their own order. In this way, Ignatius not careerism among the Jesuits, but also spoke a to the clerical culture rampant in the Catholic

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and people to do terrible things. At its best, though, our natural tendency to believe that we have all the what many detractors say, and despite the arrogance infects religious groups, religion at its best in-tends to your life.

Religion also reflects the social dimension of human nature. Human beings naturally desire to be with one another, and that desire extends to worship. It's natural to want to worship together, to gather with other people who share your desire for God, and to work with others to fulfill the dreams of your community.

Experiencing God also comes through personal interactions within the community. Sure, God communicates through private, intimate moments—as in prayer or reading of sacred texts—but God also enters into relationships with us through others in a faith community. Finding God often happens in the midst of a community—with a "we" as often as an "I." For many people this community is a church, a synagogue, or a mosque. Or more broadly, religion.

Finally, religion means that your understanding of God and the spiritual life can more easily transcend your individual understanding and imagination. Do you imagine God as a judge? That's fine—if it helps you become a more moral and loving person. But a religious tradition can enrich your spiritual imagination in ways that you might not be able to discover by yourself.

Here's an example: one of my favorite images of God is the God of Surprises, which I first encountered in the novitiate. My own idea of God at the time was limited to God the Far-Away One, so it was liberating to hear about a God who surprises, who waits for us with wonderful things. It's a playful, even fun, image of God. But I would have never come up with it on my own. It came to me from David Donovan, my spiritual director, who had read it in a book of that same title, by an English Jesuit named Gerard W. Hughes, who borrowed it from an essay by the German Jesuit Karl Rahner.

That image was amplified when I read the conclusion of one of the great modern spiritual novels, *Mariette in Ecstasy*. Ron Hansen, an award-winning writer who is also an ordained Catholic deacon, penned the story of the religious experiences of a young nun in the

early 1900s, loosely based on the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the French Carmelite. At the end of the story, Mariette, who had left the monastery many years before, writes to her former novice director and assures her that God still communicates with her.

We try to be formed and held and kept by him, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, Surprise me.

The image of the God who surprises and the God who waits for surprises came to me from three Jesuit priests and the religious imagination of a Catholic writer.

In other words, that idea was given to me by religion.

Overall, being spiritual and being religious are *both* part of being in relationship with God. Neither can be fully realized without the other. Religion without spirituality can become a dry list of dogmatic statements divorced from the life of the spirit. This is what Jesus warned against. Spirituality without religion can become a self-centered complacency divorced from the wisdom of a community. That's what I'm warning against.

For St. Ignatius Loyola the two went hand in hand. (If anything, Ignatius was criticized for being too spiritual, as his way struck some people as not centered enough on the church.) His way understands the importance of being both spiritual *and* religious.

FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

After Ignatius's conversion, his life was focused on God. The introduction to the *Spiritual Exercises* reads, "Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls." God, says Ignatius, is at the center of everything and provides meaning for our lives.

Another way of understanding that worldview from Pedro Arrupe, S.J. Father Arrupe was the head of the Society of Jesus from 1965 to 1981, a period of volcanic change in the world. He is perhaps best known for reminding the Jesuits that their original work was with the poor and marginalized.

A journalist asked Father Arrupe this question: who is Jesus Christ? One can imagine the journalist anticipating a response like "Jesus Christ is my Savior" or "Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Instead, Arrupe said, "For me Jesus Christ is Ignatius." This is a good shorthand for how Ignatius looked at God.

But not everyone reading this book has that relationship with God. Maybe few people do. For people on the path of doubt, the path of disbelief, the path of exploration, the path of confusion, the question is less about devoting oneself to God and more about something else, the question that Ignatius asks: how do I find God?

Here is where we can turn to an important question: how can God speak directly with people in astonishing ways? This can lead even the doubtful and confused and the skeptical. The key, the leap of faith required, is believing that the experiences are ways God *communicates* with you.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius wrote that God "communicates immediately with the creature and the creature with God." God communicates with us. Seekers, then, need to be aware of a variety of ways that God has of communicating with us. God's presence is always known.

In other words, the beginning of the path is an awareness of God's presence. Not simply awareness of the ways that God communicates but an awareness that God desires to find you.

That brings us to the first important moment in Ignatius's life: his initial conversion. By focusing on one particular incident, you can see how God communicates with you. So let's return to that event and look at it again.

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 "immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator."
 God communicates with us. Seekers, then, need to be aware of the
 variety of ways that God has of communicating with us, of making
 God's presence known.

In other words, the beginning of the path to finding God is
 awareness. Not simply awareness of the ways that you can find God,
 but an awareness that God desires to find you.

That brings us to the first important moment in the life of
 Ignatius: his initial conversion. By focusing more carefully on this
 one particular incident, you can see how God can use everything to
 find you. So let's return to that event and look at it in greater detail.

LITTLE BY LITTLE

Iñigo of Loyola, as I mentioned earlier, was thirty years old when his leg was shattered by a cannonball during the siege of a castle by the French military in Pamplona in 1521. This pivotal incident, which might have been merely a tragic setback to another person, marked the beginning of Ignatius's new life.

After Ignatius stayed in Pamplona for several days, his French captors, who treated him "with courtesy and kindness," brought him back to his family's castle, where the doctors reset the bone. To do so, they had to break the leg. "This butchery was done again," he writes in his *Autobiography*. His condition worsened, and those around him, worried that he was about to die, arranged for him to have the last rites.

Finally he recovered. Yet Ignatius noticed something troubling: the bone below one knee had been poorly set, shortening his leg. "The bone protruded so much that it was an ugly business." Now his vanity took over. "He was unable to abide it," he wrote, "because he was determined to follow the world." He couldn't abide the idea of being thought unattractive.

Despite the pain involved, he asked the surgeons to cut away the bone. Looking back, the older Ignatius recognized his foolishness. "He was determined to make himself a martyr to his own pleasure," he wrote.

During his subsequent convalescence, Ignatius was unable to find books on what he most enjoyed reading: adventure stories and tales of chivalry. The only things available were a life of Jesus and the lives of the saints. To his surprise, he found that he enjoyed the tales of the saints. Thinking about what the saints had done filled him with a sense that they would be "easy to accomplish."

Still, he was attracted to the ideals of knightly service, and when he wasn't reading about the life of Christ or the lives of the saints, he mused about doing great deeds for "a certain lady." Even though her

station was higher than a countess or a duchess, she was won on winning her over with daring exploits. In that way, he was different from some men in our time, or any time.

So he went back and forth, thinking about how to win the noble lady and doing heroic things for God.

Then a strange thing happened, something that affected not only Ignatius but the life of every Jesuit and that followed the way of Ignatius.

Ignatius slowly realized that the *aftereffects* of his life were different. After he thought about impressing the noble lady with exploits on the battlefield, he felt one way. After he thought about great things and undergoing hardships for God, he felt another.

I'll let him describe it in one of the most famous passages in his autobiography:

Yet there was a difference. When he was thinking about the things of the world, he took much delight in them. Afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside, he was dry and discontented. But when he thought about going to Jerusalem, barefoot and eating no meat, and undergoing all the things that the saints had done, not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts, but after putting them aside, he remained contented.

He did not notice this, however; nor did he ponder the difference until one day his eyes were troubled a little, and he began to marvel at the difference. From experience that some thoughts left him happy and some unhappy. Little by little he came to recognize the difference between the spirits that agitated him, one from the world and one from God.

Ignatius began to understand that these differences might be ways that God was communicating with him.

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station was higher than a countess or a duchess, Ignatius was obsessed with winning her over with daring exploits. In this way he wasn't very different from some men in our time, or any time for that matter.

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Then a strange thing happened, something that would influence not only Ignatius but the life of every Jesuit and anyone who has followed the way of Ignatius.

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Yet there was a difference. When he was thinking about the things of the world, he took much delight in them, and afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside, he found that he was dry and discontented. But when he thought of going to Jerusalem, barefoot and eating nothing but herbs and undergoing all the things that the saints endured, not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts, but even after putting them aside, he remained content and happy.

He did not notice this, however; nor did he stop to ponder the difference until one day his eyes were opened a little, and he began to marvel at the difference, realizing from experience that some thoughts left him sad and others happy. Little by little he came to recognize the difference between the spirits that agitated him, one from the enemy and one from God.

Ignatius began to understand that these feelings and desires might be ways that God was communicating with him. This is not

to say that Ignatius found God and women in opposition. Rather, he began to see that his desires of winning fame by impressing others drew him away from God. His desires to surrender to a more generous and selfless way of life drew him toward God. What religious writers call a "grace" was not simply that he *had* these insights, but that he *understood them as coming from God*.

As a result of his experience, Ignatius began to understand that God wants to communicate with us. Directly.

This idea would get Ignatius in trouble with the Inquisition and land him in jail. (Ignatius had his own problems with "religion" at times.) Some critics suspected that Ignatius was trying to bypass the institutional church. If God could deal with humanity directly, they wondered, what need was there for the church?

As I've mentioned, religion enables people to encounter God in profound ways in their lives. But Ignatius recognized that God could not be confined within the walls of the church. God was larger than the church.

Today the Ignatian notion of the Creator's dealing directly with human beings is less controversial. It's assumed by those on the "spiritual but not religious" journey. The far more controversial idea these days is that God would speak to us through religion.

But Ignatius's insight is as liberating today as it was in his time. And it is here that Ignatian spirituality can help even the doubtful find God.

Some agnostics or atheists await a rational argument or a philosophical proof to demonstrate the existence of God. Some will not believe until someone can show them how suffering can coexist with the belief in God. A few may even hope for an incontrovertible physical "sign" to convince them of God's presence.

But God often speaks in ways that are beyond our intellect or reason, beyond philosophical proofs. While many are brought to God through the mind, just as many are brought to God through the heart. Here God often speaks more gently, more quietly, as he did during Ignatius's convalescence. In these quiet moments God often speaks the loudest.

Let's look at some examples of these quiet, our own lives.

You are holding an infant, maybe your own, and you are looking at you with wide-open eyes, and you are filled with a surprising sense of gratitude or awe. You wonder: *Where do these powerful feelings come from? I've never felt like this before.*

You are walking along the beach, and you have your eyes to the horizon, you are filled with a sense of peace that is all out of proportion to what you expect. You wonder: *Why am I getting so emotional about the beach?*

You are in the midst of a sexual encounter with your husband or wife, or an intimate moment with a friend or boyfriend, and you marvel at your capacity for love. You wonder: *How can I be so happy?*

You are out to dinner or with a friend and you experience a sense of contentment, and you recognize how blessed you are to be blessed with her friendship. You wonder: *Where did this extraordinary night come from? Where did this deep feeling come from?*

You have finally been able to come to terms with a tragedy in your life, a sickness or death, or your own failure, consoled by a friend, and you are overcome with a sense of peace. You wonder: *How is it that I am finally at peace in the midst of sadness?*

Gratitude, peace, and joy are ways that God communicates with us. During these times, we are feeling a real connection, though we might not initially identify it as such. The first step in accepting that these are ways that God is communicating is to accept that. That is, the first step involves a bit of trust.

Conversely, during times of stress and doubt, or even anger, we can also experience God's communication.

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You are in the midst of a sexual encounter with your husband or wife, or an intimate moment with your girlfriend or boyfriend, and you marvel at your capacity for joy. You wonder: *How can I be so happy?*

You are out to dinner or with a friend and feel a sudden sense of contentment, and you recognize how lucky you are to be blessed with her friendship. You wonder: *This is an ordinary night. Where did this deep feeling come from?*

You have finally been able to come to terms with a tragedy in your life, a sickness or death, or you find yourself consoled by a friend, and you are overcome with calm. You wonder: *How is it that I am finally at peace in the midst of such sadness?*

Gratitude, peace, and joy are ways that God communicates with us. During these times, we are feeling a real connection with God, though we might not initially identify it as such. The key insight is accepting that these are ways that God is communicating with us. That is, the first step involves a bit of trust.

Conversely, during times of stress and doubt and sorrow and anger, we can also experience God's communication.

You accompany a good friend or relative struggling with a horrible illness, or maybe you are ill. You think: *How could this happen?* And you feel a desperate need, an urgent longing, for some comfort or connection.

You are in the midst of a stressful time and wonder how you can ever get through the day. Then someone says something that goes straight to your heart, consoling you out of all proportion to the words, and you feel supported and loved. You think: *How could just those few words help me?*

You are at a funeral and wonder over the meaning of human life. Or you are tired and stressed from your life and wonder how much more you can take. You think: *Is there anyone out there aware of me, who is looking out for me?*

In each of these times—happy and sad, consoling and confusing, intimate and overwhelming—something special is happening, something more than just emotional “projection.” The excess of feeling seems disproportionate to the cause, or perhaps it’s hard to see *any* obvious cause. As well, there is a certain expansion of the soul, a loss of inhibition, and perhaps even an increase in one’s feelings of love and generosity. (Abraham Maslow, the social psychologist, spoke of these as “peak experiences.”) There may even be a change in one’s outlook on life, and a great sense of peace or joy.

During these times, I believe, you are feeling a manifestation of your innate attraction to God. You are feeling what St. Augustine described in the fourth century. “Lord, our hearts are restless,” he wrote, “until they rest in you.” The pull that draws you to God comes from God.

Now we need to talk about that attraction from a different angle, and using another word. We’re going to talk about something that Ignatius considered to be at the heart of the spiritual life. And it might surprise you.

We’re going to talk about desire.

What Do You Want?

Desire and the Spiritual Life

TWO OF THE GOSPELS include the deceptively simple story of Jesus of Nazareth meeting a blind beggar along the road. In the Gospel of Mark, he is given a name: Bartimaeus, which in Greek means “son of Timaeus” (see Mark 10:46–52).

Bartimaeus is seated by the side of the road when Jesus and his disciples pass by. The Gospel of Mark says that a “large crowd” was following Jesus, so there must have been a lot of commotion. You can easily picture the blind man shouting and crying out as he goes on.

When Bartimaeus hears who is passing by, he cries out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Here is some irony: Jesus is surrounded by a large crowd, but many in the crowd have no idea who Jesus is. Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is kept hidden from most people. (The Gospel of Mark calls this the “Messianic secret.”) The blind man, however, sees Jesus.

The crowd shushes Bartimaeus. But he is not deterred. He cries out again. The blind man, who has probably been shouting for most of his life, wants Jesus to notice him. The unseen Jesus hears him.

Finally, Jesus hears him and invites him over. Jesus says something that has the ring of truth, the man’s friends and family have been shushing him, now say, “Get up, he is calling to you.” In a gesture of freedom, he throws off his cloak and approaches Jesus.

Jesus says to Bartimaeus, “What do you want?”