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On the brink: How Ignatius can offer you care today

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Young Voices

My favorite saint is St. Ignatius of Loyola, whose feast day is July 31. Born into a Spanish family in the Basque country in the northern part of Spain, Inigo had a conversion experience during his convalescence after a cannonball shattered his knee in a battle at Pamplona. His imagination, courage, valor and striving toward excellence has caught my attention and informs my spirituality. In fact, it is these same traits that offer insight and direction to the Society of Jesus and all their ministries and works throughout the world.

Ignatius was also in touch with the parts of himself that were incomplete, thirsting for, hungry for, longing for a deeper relationship with God and with others. He has been known to have wept at the very celebration of Eucharist because he feels so deeply.

A friend of mine told me he carries an empty plastic container for facial tissues in his pocket to remind himself that his work as a chaplain does not involve wiping away tears, but to allow others to cry and express themselves in a safe and sacred space.

That behavior struck me as I contemplated how Ignatius' life helps inform us today. How we can be people of strong conviction grounded in our own experience of life and all its joys and griefs?

The simplicity of Ignatius's Examen (a methodological way to find God in all things and experience the freedom of God's gifts and grace) can speak dramatically to our lives that are full of noise, conflict, tension and pain. Here's a quick version you may want to practice sometime:

1. Be aware of your breathing. Be aware of your posture. Be aware of God's presence in your life.
2. Like a movie, play a segment of your life again. It may be just the time since you woke up, the last 24 hours, the past week, or even the past year or several years. Choose a time frame, remember who you were with, the sights and smells of each moment. Grow in awareness of your feelings -- mad,

glad, sad or scared. Be aware of what you heard, touched, tasted. Say thank you to God.

3. Now as you review these past moments, there may be a significant moment that has emerged for you to contemplate deeper. Take a moment to see what God sees in this moment. Say thank you.
4. There may also be a significant moment that emerged because you now experience regret for how you acted or for what you thought or for what you said. Take a moment to recollect this event. When you are ready, ask God to forgive you for not being at your best.
5. After moments of quiet and deeper contemplation, consider what you would like to be hopeful for with God's help. Bring your entire awareness to this hope and pray for the strength to continue to answer God's call in your life.

Sometimes this exercise takes just a few minutes, but sometimes it can take an hour or a lifetime.

I thought of this practice the other day when a colleague of mine introduced some of Joan Halifax's work. With the practice of mindfulness (a state of active, open attention on the present) growing in popularity and accessibility, Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax is able to describe and name "6 Edge States" where people find themselves in a state of overstimulation and the nervous system is over- or hyper-aroused. The practice of self-care is more than just a trip to the spa or a nice cup of tea. In fact, there is medical evidence that the nervous system occupies one of two states: activated or relaxed. Our nervous systems cannot experience both simultaneously. Halifax clarifies that as a society we find ourselves enduring minutes, hours, days, months, years of activation that need to be renewed by experiences of relaxation. It's almost like our bodies need to be recharged like we so religiously do with our cellphones, computers, even hybrid cars.

I started thinking about the state of the church, the tension we experience with one another, the problem of poverty, the trauma of abortions and divorces, the tiptoeing and perhaps avoidance around issues of healthy sexuality. I wonder if our church finds itself in an Edge State, as Halifax describes it. If so, how can we reset our community and our relationships with one another?

Pathological altruism: This is the state of the psyche when one says, "I have to help someone. It's my identity." This extreme desire to help is often at a profound cost to the helper. Oftentimes, this dynamic looks like a codependent relationship where helpers have a bloated sense of the ego and lack the awareness of their own humanity. In a significant way, the helpers' inability to allow someone to suffer continues to hurt themselves.

Have we depended too much on the work of Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Service to please our own guilty consciences around inequality, privilege and power?

Vital exhaustion: Some may call this state "burnout" when all our internal energy needs to be replenished.

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Are our pastors, religious educators, administrators, principals, bishops just beyond tired?

Vicarious trauma: Secondary stress caused by a traumatic event. The role of witness most often experiences a piece of the trauma, from witnessing a car accident to the demoralizing situation of being in a congregation with a guilty pedophile and affected families.

How can the church begin to trust other members in this experience of the body of Christ again? What processing needs to be made available for the secondary stress caused by the sex abuse scandals as it relates to our own participation in church?

Moral distress: Being in a position that violates your morals, integrity and sense of justice. The tension between loving the sinner and hating the sin can tear at a person's moral fiber and cause severe distress when understanding and reconciliation cannot be reached.

How do I support a gay sibling and still stay true to the Catholic teaching? Would I even want to?

Hostility and bullying: This exists both vertically and horizontally when people undermine another person's value over time. The difference between the laity and clergy normally does not create this dynamic; rather, it's how the laity and the clergy use their power toward developing better relationships.

From the church lady to the demanding pastor, how can we remember to treat one another with dignity and respect instead of impatience and ultimatums?

Systemic violence: When there is a history of violence in a family, culture or nation this may lead to despair and distrust. Being exposed to a legacy of violence predisposes one to be defensive and on-guard.

How can we imagine a better way of including everyone and minimize the harm we cause to one another?

So, are we on the brink or have we fallen over the deep end already? Joan Halifax would remind us to recharge and take a moment for relaxation -- sit, take a deep breath, feel the chair you are sitting on, feel how your back is supported, then continue to breathe. Ignatius would encourage us to stay with our senses, practice the Examen, and cultivate gratitude, reconciliation and hopefulness.

Perhaps this experience must now be communal.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit www.contemplativesinaction.org for more information.]

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