

The **Call** to  
**Discernment**  
in Troubled Times

**New Perspectives on the  
Transformative Wisdom  
of Ignatius of Loyola**

**D E A N   B R A C K L E Y**

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## 2 ✨ Free to Love

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*  
(Gal. 5:13–14)

The Beatles were right: all you need is love. But real love does not come cheap. Dorothy Day used to quote Dostoyevsky, saying, "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."<sup>1</sup> What love requires is not always obvious. Above all, love demands sacrifice, and we are slow to sign up for that. And even when we do, the path of love is full of traps and blind alleys that steer us off track or turn us around. Our frailty and our fears block our way to serious commitment. To respond with love to a world which seems to have gone wrong in fundamental ways, a broken world, we must get free to love—we need to find a way to love better and over the long haul.

### THE FOUNDATION

Popular wisdom and songs are full of advice about how to live and to love, but how far does that advice lead us? This book offers a way based on the spiritual wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuits.

A set of basic propositions called "The Foundation" stands at the beginning of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. The Foundation speaks to the heart of life's drama. It is about getting free to love. With the addition of a clarifying amendment at the beginning, it reads as follows:

Human beings are created to love God with their whole heart and soul, essentially by loving and serving their neighbors. In this way

they participate in God's plan to bring all creation to completion and so arrive at their own ultimate fulfillment (eternal life).

The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings, and to help them to pursue the end for which they are created.

From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward that end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it.

For this reason it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden, in such a way that, for our part, we not seek health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so on in all other matters, wanting and choosing only that which leads more to the end for which we are created [23].<sup>2</sup>

The original text begins: "Human beings are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their souls," but I have translated "save their souls" as "attain their ultimate fulfillment." I have specified what Ignatius left implicit: that we praise and serve God essentially by loving our neighbor.

The Foundation outlines a vision of life and the most basic criteria for making choices. It says that we live well and attain our ultimate purpose by loving just one thing, or rather some One, and that this requires interior freedom — freedom to choose, habitually, the most loving thing. According to the Foundation, serving God is what makes us happy. If that is true, then the sensible way to deal with "all other things on the face of the earth" is to embrace them to the extent that they contribute to that goal and shun them when they do not. We should be ready for riches or poverty, honor or dishonor, health or sickness, a long life or a short life, depending on whether they serve this goal. It makes no sense to have nonnegotiables in life: for example, to pursue economic security or social prestige no matter what, or to determine to do nothing, ever, that might endanger our health. Rather, says Ignatius, we should be "indifferent" to such alternatives.

“Indifferent” is probably not the best choice of words. As the Ignatian scholar George Ganss says, “indifference” here means:

undetermined to one thing or option rather than another; impartial; unbiased; with decision suspended until the reasons for a wise choice are learned; still undecided. In no way does it mean unconcerned or unimportant. It implies interior freedom from disordered inclinations.<sup>3</sup>

{“Indifference” means inner freedom.} It is the capacity to sense and then embrace what is best, even when that goes against our inclinations. Indifference is neither stoic impassiveness nor the extinction of desire that some currents of Eastern religions advocate. It means being so passionately and single-mindedly committed, so completely in love, that we are willing to sacrifice anything, including our lives, for the ultimate goal. It means magnanimous generosity, abandonment into God’s hands, *availability*. It is not so much detachment from things as “detachability.”<sup>4</sup> It means being like a good shortstop, ready to move in any direction at the crack of the bat.

Of course, we are not indifferent to murder or adultery. Nor are we indifferent to our spouse, family, church, or anything else that serves the ultimate goal here and now. Once we determine that X is more conducive to that goal than the alternatives, we pursue X passionately. Our one great love works itself out as passionate loves of people, projects, and all creation.<sup>5</sup> But we need a radical interior freedom in order to “want and choose” what is more conducive to this goal. And, in the course of following our particular commitments, we must be free to move on when the supreme goal requires it.

“Indifference” means living “without being determined by any disordered inclination” [21]. Inclinations are likes and dislikes, “habits of the heart,” that direct the will toward food, possessions, sexual gratification, or sleep; or toward beauty, order, or knowledge. They can be ordered or disordered. Disorder can take crude forms of compulsion or more refined, socially constructed forms, like legalism, racism, elitism, or conformity to convention.<sup>6</sup> Paul speaks of slavery to “the flesh” (by which he means human nature on all its levels) and even to “the law,” which comes from God.

Inner freedom is not the total absence of disordered desire. Otherwise, no one would qualify. Rather, it means being able to overcome contrary desire, especially disordered desire, when we have to. That requires *ordering our desires*, or rather allowing God to order them [16; cf. 1], like a magnet pulling iron filings into line, and to enlist them in single-minded service. That is what happens when we fall in love: the one we love engages our feelings and aligns them toward a single reference. This liberates us for spontaneous and creative action. Tracing the biblical roots of the Foundation can help us understand all of this better.

### COVENANT, FEAR, AND FAITH

*Assyria will not save us;  
We will not ride upon horses;  
We will say no more, "Our god,"  
to the work of our hands.  
In you the orphan finds mercy.*  
(Hos. 14:3)

The central story of the Hebrew Bible is the Exodus. Yahweh, the god of Israel, freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and led them to the land of promise. Once out in the desert, Yahweh made a covenant with Israel and promised them security and well-being (*shalom*). That is what gods were supposed to do for communities at risk from war, disease, wild animals, and crop failure. In turn, Israel promised to look to Yahweh alone. This covenant of exclusive adherence was revolutionary. Ancient Near Eastern peoples usually worshiped several gods simultaneously, looking to one for copious rainfall, another for the fertility of the flock, still another for national security. Yahweh rejected this divine division of labor, assuming exclusive responsibility for Israel's well-being and making an unheard-of demand: "You shall have no other gods besides me" (Exod. 20:3). The Great Commandment of the Book of Deuteronomy, the *Shema*, restates this: "Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might"

(Deut. 6:4–5). You shall not give Yahweh 80 percent of your heart and the remaining 20 percent to some other god, for “Yahweh is a jealous god” (Deut. 6:15). Israel must live entirely by “hearing” Yahweh’s word and following his instruction (*torah*). This exclusive “love” is love and trust all in one – the fundamental religious attitude we call faith.<sup>7</sup>

With this, humanity takes a decisive step forward. Serving many gods pulls a people, or an individual, in more than one direction, like someone trying to manage two spouses. To serve Yahweh alone means having an undivided heart. A single super-loyalty puts all others in perspective. That means not being tyrannized by anything in heaven or on earth. It means freedom. This is the taproot of the Ignatian Foundation.

The Bible, Ignatius, and traditional spiritual theology all target “disordered inclinations” as key obstacles to freedom. The Bible stresses the *objects* of these inclinations, which it calls idols. Israel was to embrace the God of life and reject the idols of death (cf. Deut. 30:15–20). Idol-language discloses the public dimension of our internal disorders.

Here the Bible takes aim at one disordered inclination: fear. [Insecurity stirs our fear – of hardship, rejection, and death.] Fear “disorders” our desires; we grasp for idols which promise security, but fail to deliver it. Idols enslave their devotees and demand human sacrifice.

Today we have different insecurities, and different idols. Although we can control our surroundings better than our ancestors, we are still afraid. We cling to the means of control – money, power, status, and weaponry. “Indifference” is the freedom to let those things go. As the song says, “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.”

I live in El Salvador, where I have been amazed at people who seem to have lost all fear, including mothers and spouses of those “disappeared” and massacred during the civil war of the 1980s. In a tense situation during the war, one woman told me, “*Mire*, when you’ve hunted for your children among piles of corpses, you are no longer afraid. They can’t do anything to you anymore.”

[Although fear is natural and beneficial in the presence of danger, it can dominate us.] It need not, however. When terror invaded Jesus in the garden, he overcame it, by placing his destiny in his Father’s hands:

"Let your will, not mine, be done." He repeatedly called his disciples to radical trust: "Why are you fearful, you of little faith?" "Do not be afraid!" Pointing to the birds and the lilies, he told them not to worry about food or clothing. His message was that God knows and cares for you. Seek first God's Reign and its justice, and all your personal needs will be met (cf. Matt. 6:25–33). The Letter to the Hebrews says Jesus cut the root of fear. He set "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (2:15).

"Indifference" to food, shelter, clothing – and death – might sound foolish, or even dangerous. Yet even those things we most need, and to which we have a right, can dominate us. And none of these things, nor all good things together, can make us happy by themselves.<sup>8</sup> They can relieve suffering and give pleasure. Going without them brings pain, even death. But all the satisfaction that things can give us does not add up to happiness; and all the pain of loss does not add up to unhappiness.

Happiness goes deeper than pleasure; misery goes deeper than pain. When peace and happiness are present, they flow deep within us like a river, even when we lack things that are good, even when we lack things that are essential (cf. John 7:37–39). That living water does not depend decisively on what we have or where we are. Paul wrote to the Romans:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, ... For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35–39)

Thus Paul could write, "In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Phil. 4:11–13).

The river of living water is not our private property but a river shared and "channeled" by friends who nourish a common vision and praxis. (This is what church is supposed to be and do.) In this sense, friends (and spouses) do "make us happy." But if one or another dies, despite our loss and grief, our happiness should remain. Its ultimate source lies

## WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND SOUL AND STRENGTH

Radical trust and total commitment can seem like a lot to ask for. In the final analysis we will only find out whether the Great Commandment and the Foundation make sense if we take up their challenge. But perhaps it will help if we briefly address some of the obstacles that often block this path. These issues all deserve more extensive treatment and we will return to some of them later. The first difficulty is often faith itself.

- Faith includes both trust and belief: for example, the belief that God exists and acts on our behalf. Faith is not an irrational leap in the dark. While it leaps beyond the evidence at hand, faith leaps from the solid platform of experience and in the direction in which the evidence points. We exercise faith like this in the bus driver, the dentist, our friend or spouse. We trust them, based on our experience or on others' testimony, and we risk the leap because it is more reasonable to trust than not to. When Jesus chided his disciples for their lack of faith, it was not because he wanted them to act irrationally, but because "having eyes they did not *see* and having ears they did not *listen*." Their senses were dulled, their capacity to experience deadened. They failed to penetrate reality (cf. Mark 8:18) and to perceive the Reign of God in their midst. Authentic testimonies of faith are based on experience. They shine like a beacon not on some imaginary world but deep into the heart of reality, which we experience all too superficially. The difference between religious faith and everyday faith (in the dentist, for example) lies in the type of evidence and the type of subsequent verification which, in the case of



religious faith, almost always leave room for doubt. But doubt also stalks our faith that someone loves us. In neither case does doubt invalidate faith, or necessarily weaken it.

- But how is total commitment to God compatible with freedom and human fulfillment? The God of the Bible is not another "entity" in the universe. This God acts like no other agent, desiring only our freedom and full humanity and to bring all creation to fulfillment, and working only for that. God is Love, says John's famous letter, a God with whom we can fall in love. Otherwise, total commitment would make no sense.

- The "praise, reverence and service of God" [23] consists, essentially, in loving our neighbor as ourselves, especially our neighbor who is a victim of injustice (cf. Luke 10:25-37). That is our sole obligation (Matt. 7:12; etc.).<sup>9</sup>

- Instead of an impossible burden imposed from outside us, the New Testament understands love to be an internal dynamic of freedom (James 1:25), which the divine Spirit helps us live out with joy and satisfaction.

- Finally, there is the problem of how exclusive loyalty to one god has served to legitimate patriarchal-authoritarian societies, families, and churches, as well as fanatical intolerance and imperial conquest. In fact, like anything else, religion, too, can be abused. However, that does not invalidate monotheism any more than Hitler's *Mein Kampf* invalidates books. But it should serve as a warning. Religion only liberates when it is prophetic, that is, when it denounces abuse, defends the weak and announces a credible utopia. Such a vision inspired people like Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero — and Jesus of Nazareth.

elsewhere. Landscapes, a party, or a community victory can swell our joy, but they do not create it.

That peace and joy is what we were born for. Its necessary condition is the freedom to love. Our happiness seems to depend on how we respond to the insecurities that besiege us. In the end, there are only two ways to deal with them: either we grasp for idols or we live by faith. When we grasp for idols, they turn on us and dominate our lives. To live by faith is to abandon ourselves to the Ultimate Reality which surrounds and penetrates us and which alone satisfies us.

The people of Israel expressed this faith in song:

God is our refuge and strength,  
 a very present help in trouble.  
 Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,  
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
 though its waters roar and foam,  
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult. . . .  
 Yahweh of hosts is with us;  
 the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Ps. 46)

St. Teresa of Avila prayed with similar faith in the midst of conflicts and trials:

Let nothing disturb you, let nothing dismay you;  
 All else changes; God alone remains.  
 Patient endurance attains to all things.  
 The one who has God finds she lacks nothing,  
 and God alone suffices.

The psalm and Teresa bear witness to the radical trust and total commitment of the Great Commandment and the Ignatian Foundation.

## CONCLUSION

According to the Foundation, our fulfillment depends on getting free to love. The insecurities of life stir our fears — of hardship, rejection, and death. As fear grows, it “disorders” our loves and drives us to serve idols that enslave and dehumanize.

By faith we can abandon ourselves to the Mystery that surrounds us, confident that the universe is in good hands. Faith in this radical goodness overcomes fear and orders our loves. But to come to terms with radical goodness, we must also come to terms with evil. The truth — the double truth about radical evil and radical goodness — will set us free.