

Recently in a spiritual direction session I encouraged a directee to use his imagination in prayer.

“Picture yourself as a small child, playing in the park where you play with your own children. Imagine that God is with you. He has nothing else to do right now. He is fully present with you, with no other agenda except to be with you. What might you show Him? What might you say to Him? What might He say to you?”

This approach to encounter with God can and does offend Evangelical sensibilities. Won't using your imagination lead you astray, down theological bunny trails, or even lose you in the woods? Isn't the heart deceitful in all its ways? At the very least, the cultivation of imagination in prayer can be seen as a foolish and frivolous pursuit.

I would argue that imaginative prayer is a potent tool for encounter and transformation. It reveals our depths and invites us into the depths of God. In this paper we will explore the nature of imagination, and why it is an effective adjunct to prayer. We will have a look at ways to make Evangelicals more comfortable with the use of their imagination, and specifically discuss the role of the director in facilitating this mode of prayer.

Ignatius of Loyola was a champion of the use of imagination in prayer, and his Spiritual Exercises invite the directee on an imaginative journey that begins with creation and follows Jesus through the gospels, considers Him in His kingship, and even meditates on the various conditions of the directee's own heart. Kevin O'Brian, in his book *The Ignatian Adventure*, says “Ignatius was convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts and memories.”<sup>1</sup> Larry Warner, in his book *Journey With Jesus*, says,

Incorporating the imagination and the senses as a means to enter into the Gospel narratives is the genius of the Exercises and once again flows out of Ignatius's own conversion experience, which resulted from hours spent imaginatively journeying with Jesus through the Gospel narratives as he recuperated. Ignatius came to realize that employing the imagination and senses helps people to involve their feelings and creativity as well as the cognitive aspects of their being, while opening themselves to God in deeper and more profound ways.<sup>2</sup>

How then should we view the imagination? Warner calls the imagination a God-given gift. “When I speak of the imagination I am referring to what C. S. Lewis called the baptized imagination and what Bruce Demarest refers to as the “sanctified” use of imagination. The imagination is a God-given gift that is not frivolous, evil or childish.”<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to say:

When I refer to imaginative prayer, I am speaking of a Spirit-infused, God-directed use of your imagination that gives you the ability to experientially enter into the stories, symbolism and images of the Bible. It empowers you to hold the now with both the past and future, and to see and embrace the seen (physical) and the unseen (eternal). The Spirit-infused imagination moves you from sterile head knowledge to life-transforming, heart-healing, biblically informed ways of being and of doing life. It is as we embrace and employ the use of our God-given, Spirit-infused imagination that we can enter the wonder and mystery of God and God's Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin O'Brian, *The Ignatian Adventure* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011) p.141.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Warner, *Journey With Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010) loc 2176.

<sup>3</sup> Warner, loc 450.

As we use this method, we are trusting in God and will be evaluating the images that arise based on God's revealed truths found in the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Warner also cites trusted Evangelical spiritual guides Richard Foster and Eugene Peterson:

Richard Foster talks about the benefits of using our imagination when we interact with Scripture: "We begin to enter the story and make it our own. We move from detached observation to active participation. Using the imagination also brings the emotions into the equation so that we can come to God with both mind and heart."<sup>5</sup>

Eugene Peterson writes, For Christians whose largest investment is in the invisible (eternal), the imagination is indispensable. . . . Right now one of the essential Christian ministries in our ruined world is the recovery and exercise of the imagination. . . . Imagination is the mental tool we have for connecting material and spiritual, visible and invisible, earth and heaven. . . . Imagination catapults us into mystery.<sup>6</sup>

Muldoon in his book the *Ignatian Workout: Daily Spiritual Exercises for a Healthy Faith*, talks of the value of utilizing imagination to enhance athletic performance. When he trains his rowers he counsels them to imagine their stroke. How their arms are moving - their legs in unison. How the paddles are cutting through the water. How they are breathing. Muldoon asserts that such imaginings are just as pertinent for spiritual athleticism.

"By bringing imagination to bear on a particular aspect of our spiritual lives, we come to better understand what struggles we face, what issues we have yet to resolve, what ways God is calling us to grow. It is a very straightforward way of paying attention to our deeper selves, which often get overlooked in our busy lives."<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to say "In prayer, imagination can help us pay attention to things that we have not, perhaps, previously considered."<sup>8</sup> "Applying imagination to this story enables me to consider many different scenarios and to focus on different elements. When I do this, I am able to think about it in a richer way and to draw from it interesting conclusions about how I look at Jesus and his followers. I am able to bring the background into the foreground and pay greater attention to it, to see what I can learn from it. And I can ask God to help me understand what God wants."<sup>9</sup>

John English, S. J. in his Spiritual Direction Guide *Spiritual Freedom*, asserts that the use of imagination in prayer is transformational.

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<sup>4</sup> Warner, loc 462.

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 169, 171.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Muldoon, *The Ignatian Workout* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), loc 857.

<sup>8</sup> Muldoon, loc 899.

<sup>9</sup> Muldoon, loc 931.

“Images have the power to move the heart and bring about transformation...they reach into the deepest part of our being and change us, giving us insight and releasing energy. The faculty by which we apprehend images is, of course, the imagination.”<sup>10</sup>

What deep parts of our being are reached? English believes it is images that we carry, often lurking in our subconscious. Images of self and images of God. These may be authentic or inauthentic. Often they are incomplete and largely unchallenged. The use of imagination in prayer invites those images to emerge from the shadows, and speak whatever “truth” they may carry.

Let’s go back to my directee. What if he has a lurking, subterranean image of God as distant and distracted, an image that he is largely unaware of and yet impacts his relationship with Him. How might an invitation to picture God playing in the park with him make room for that image to emerge? Through the use of the imagination the directee may be able to move past his “proper theology” - the right answer that his imagines is expected of her - and experience viscerally how alone he feels. How forgotten by a distracted God. Once those images come to the light the director and directee can then begin to compassionately observe them and begin to test their veracity.

Transformation can come not only through the revelation and examination of God and self images, but also through what English calls “peak experiences.” These often experiences have a strong affective component. We encounter God and are encountered in ways that shake and shape us.

Many years ago while I was in prayer with my ladies group, a simple image flashed through my mind. It was an image of me as a child, wearing a white dress. In that moment, I understood at a visceral level that I was forgiven. Not for a specific sin or situation per se. More like in that moment I was named as a child of forgiveness, free from sin and its effects. The image was a momentary impression, but its effects have been permanently transformational. Prior to receiving that image, I struggled with my relationships with men in authority, afraid of making mistakes. If I did make a mistake, I never felt forgiven and would apologize repeatedly. I had a cringing, subservient attitude towards male leaders. All of that melted away in an instant when I received that image, that symbol of my standing in Christ. I have never struggled with that issue since that day.

Transformation often begins with a peak experience...such experiences have a strong affective component. These experiences bring a new awareness of an inner unconscious life - perhaps through a dream, music, nature or liturgy...A basic shift of identity takes place and the person now lives all aspects of life from a new perspective with different awareness, discernment, and decisions. Transformation of identity involves a person’s whole being.<sup>11</sup>

We are transformed by images and peak experiences, and also moved to commitment, says English. He cites John Henry Cardinal Newman.

...the imagination is an instrument that brings us to commitment. People, Newman says, are moved to act not by notions but by what seizes their imagination. The imagination creates the symbolic present and future state of the person, and with grace, calls forth transformation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John J. English, S.J., *Spiritual Freedom* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1995) p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> English, p. 241, 242.

<sup>12</sup> English, p. 241.

How then can a spiritual director help a directee feel at ease with imagination in prayer, and enjoy its benefits?

Some instruction on the benefits and mechanics of the use of imagination in prayer can be helpful. So can leading the directee through a prayer to offer our imaginations to God as an instrument for His use. If the theological framework of the directee includes an understanding of spiritual warfare, I would also lead them in a prayer of protection, silencing the voice of the enemy and declaring with the directee that we have the mind of Christ.

O'Brian offers this counsel that can be helpful in assessment, but also for those who struggle to be imaginative.

We might initially worry about going beyond the text of the Gospel. If you have offered your time of prayer to God, then begin by trusting that God is communicating with you. If you wonder if your imagination is going "too far," then do some discernment with how you are praying. Where did your imagining lead you: Closer to God or farther away? Is your imagining bringing you consolation or desolation? Some people find imaginative prayer difficult. They may not be able to picture the scene easily, yet they may have some intuition or gut reaction to the story. Or they may hear or feel the story more than visualize it. In a spirit of generosity, pray as you are able; don't try to force it. Rest assured that God will speak to you, whether through your memory, understanding, intellect, emotions, or imagination.<sup>13</sup>

After an imaginative prayer exercise, a time of reflection can be helpful. Indeed in the Ignatian Exercises, the directee is expected to journal and reflect on their prayer experience. In that reflection, the experience of imaginative prayer can be assessed. Did it draw the directee into consolation or desolation? Did it draw the directee nearer to Jesus? How does it line up with the overarching truth of scripture? As time goes by, is good fruit being born out of those times of prayer?

John English has this counsel for directors, "While listening to the one making the exercises, the guide should constantly be trying to place the experience in an authentic theological perspective...the guide needs to know authentic images of God, self and the world as presented in the Bible and Christian tradition"<sup>14</sup>

Directors should not be afraid to utilize their own imaginations in the process.

A guide's own imagination and poetic sense often come into play. The guide's experience of making the Exercises, as well as directing them, should help him or her to intuit authentic and inauthentic experiences even when the one making the Exercises is expressing unusual images of God, self, and the world.<sup>15</sup>

I would caution against hasty assessments. Often symbols and images that come forth in imaginative prayer carry mystery. I myself have received images in imaginative prayer that I have not understood fully for months, even years after receiving them. "Guides must always keep in mind that they are privy to another person's experience of mystery while they are

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<sup>13</sup> O'Brian p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> English, p 24.

<sup>15</sup> English, p. 249.

assisting a retreatant to discern. Thus, Ignatius advises the guide to be free and allow the “Creator to deal directly with the creature”<sup>16</sup>

As image bearers and image carriers, we can co-create with God in the world and in our own souls via the use of imagination. The utilization of imagination in prayer helps us to move from the mind to the heart. We encounter not only the active work of the Holy Spirit, but also those images, beliefs and symbols we carry within our own psyche. Interaction and integration can be pathways to transformation. Warner’s words paint a compelling picture of the goodness of imaginative prayer.

The greatest validation for using imagination as a tool for interacting with the Scriptures is the Bible. In the opening chapters of Genesis, the earth is formless and void, and the Spirit of God moves across its surface. Out of nothing but God’s own imagination, light, sky, mountains, valleys and all of life are created. The final book of Revelation is bursting with dramatic images and descriptions of Jesus, heaven, the turmoil of the world and the birth of a new heaven and new earth. From the first page of Scripture to the last, our fully engaged imagination is needed to enter into and embrace this amazing story of creation and redemption, of good versus evil, of power, love, grace and hope. The Bible is written imaginatively because we are imaginative. Dramatic biblical imagery exists to help us enter into the living Word of God, to gaze upon the Lord, to look beyond the seen to the unseen (2 Cor 4: 18) and to fully embrace the truth that in God we live, move and have our being. Imagination gives us wings to soar into the wonder, mystery and truth of God and God’s Word. Imaginative prayer helps us experience the story and personally hear, see and touch Jesus. In imaginative prayer, God speaks personally and powerfully. It involves using our God-given imagination to hear from and experience God and truth in a deeply forming way. It helps us move from external head knowledge of God to an internalized, deeper knowing of God.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> English p. 250.

<sup>17</sup> Warner, loc 450-471.