

## **‘INELUCTABLE THIS SHIMMERING’**

### **The Principle and Foundation**

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THE PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION (Exx 23) begins the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. In this initial consideration, Ignatius invites people to reflect on their place and their purpose in the dynamism of creation and in the human community, their relationship with God, and their core desire for intimacy with God. For all of us, each of these dimensions of life often become distorted because of various forms of attachment.

I would like to offer an explicitly ecofeminist meditation on these themes. By basing my reflections on the experience of women (without, I hope, excluding men) I aim to expand our shared understanding of this key dynamic of the Exercises so as to recognise and understand more deeply the differing paths to conversion and right relationship of those who are marginalised or oppressed in any way, and also of those who belong to an oppressor group, consciously or unconsciously. As so many commentators on the Exercises note, the freedom of the sons and daughters of God to live in and embrace God’s purposes and deeply personal love for each one of us is the goal of the Exercises. And each of us starts from our own place.

#### ***Our Place in the World***

Denise Levertov’s poem ‘Of Being’, from which I take the title for my reflections, provides my starting point.<sup>1</sup> Levertov’s poem arises out of a

<sup>1</sup> Denise Levertov, *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 5.

*Of Being*

*I know this happiness  
is provisional:*

*the looming presences—  
great suffering, great fear—*

*withdraw only  
into peripheral vision:*

*but ineluctable this shimmering  
of wind in the blue leaves:*

*this flood of stillness  
widening the lake of sky:*

*this need to dance,  
this need to kneel:*

*this mystery:*

deep sense that happiness is only and always, at best, provisional, because the 'looming presences', the shadows of suffering and fear, only intermittently withdraw from the centre of our vision to the edges. Happiness is always at risk, always on the verge of turning into something else. But despite the ephemeral quality of happiness and the presence of suffering or fear, something deeper and more abiding is impossible to escape or diminish: 'ineluctable this shimmering'—this mystery manifesting itself in the blue leaves, in stillness, in the expansiveness of the sky; 'ineluctable this shimmering'—this Holy Mystery who captivates us with the beauty of creation, who moves us to respond with ecstatic dance or with the reverent gesture of kneeling in the face of this mystery.

Levertov brings us from human disappointment and anxiety to reverence and awe, in almost as few lines as Ignatius himself uses in the Principle and Foundation to evoke our place in the world in the language of his own sixteenth-century cosmological and theological worldview.<sup>2</sup> The mystery is 'ineluctable'—inescapable, impossible for us to avoid or evade as human beings—because we are the part of the creation that is

<sup>2</sup> 'The human person is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for the human person, and that they may help the human person in pursuing the end for which they are created.' (Exx 23)

conscious and self-reflective. We are invited by the poem to surrender to this mystery, which we have not initially chosen but which has chosen us, and which is revealed in and through the ‘ineluctable shimmering’ of everything that is, including the Word made flesh. This relational and loving, Holy, Creative Mystery both ceaselessly solicits and elicits our response of love and freedom.

### ***Downward or Upward Mobility***

In order to understand how women might experience the Principle and Foundation within the Spiritual Exercises, we may begin by looking at Ignatius’ experience first. It is obvious that the profound and wondrous experience of God that opened Ignatius’ heart, and drew him away from an egocentric desire to seek glory on the battlefield as a knight in sixteenth-century Spain to point him in another direction, is quintessentially masculine. This man of great courage and of great, but misdirected, desire for honour proven by deeds was influenced from birth by a society that placed great emphasis on such honour and on social standing. But he discovered a pedagogy for transforming this masculine, heroic ideal into a form of downward social mobility. Ignatius develops this pedagogy so as to place God at the centre of his heart and to serve this loving, creating, self-revealing God through service and love of neighbour. Ignatius’ cultivation of ‘indifference’ is predicated on privilege—the privilege of one’s personal significance being taken for granted—and in Ignatius’ society only male personhood with sufficient ‘blood purity’ counted.<sup>3</sup>

Dean Brackley treats these dynamics astutely in his discussion of the Two Standards and the Three Degrees of Humility, which reprise themes already announced in the Principle and Foundation. The way of Christ is a way of downward social mobility which supports radical solidarity with the poor, the least, the unimportant; while the way of the world is upward social mobility, climbing the ladder of success and trampling those who are below you. Brackley points out that those at the bottom of the ladder often suffer from *ressentiment*—something more subtle than resentment because of its passivity.

<sup>3</sup> In sixteenth-century Spain ‘blood purity’ meant the absence of Jewish or Muslim ancestors. Both Teresa of Ávila and Ignatius accepted candidates into their communities who did not conform to such ‘purity’, including Teresa herself.

In resentment one feels the impotence of frustrating encounters with one's superior rival(s) .... producing painful tension that eventually finds release in the denigration of the rival's values ....<sup>4</sup>

Those at the top may suffer from arrogance, but are also deeply affected by insecurity about being displaced from the rung of the ladder they occupy. Brackley proposes that the antidote to both arrogance and *resentment* is magnanimity, as well as humility.

It matters for us all where we find ourselves in the various hierarchies that govern our lives. The structures of the workplace, for most people in business, education, government and the Church, remain hierarchical: work life for the individual is one grand climb to the top of the ladder, while the larger organization is driven to reach the top of the rankings that quantify success in its field. Our place and scope of activity are determined by such rankings.

Paradoxically, this means that the current worldwide financial crisis is affecting men disproportionately more than women in terms of job loss. This may be because of the disparity in pay between men and women in the workforce, or because more men are at the top of the ladder or work in fields still dominated by men. As a result, many men are being displaced in ways that are deeply wounding to their sense of themselves and their rightful place in society. The destabilising of any hierarchy results in losing one's rightful (often taken-for-granted) place in work and family. Even in supposedly egalitarian societies, there is only room at the top of any ladder for the few and not the many. For the most part only businesses and non-profit organizations led by women have experimented with alternative styles of leadership based on cooperation, collaboration and collegiality.

Within the Roman Catholic Church, the place of women remains at the bottom of the ecclesial ladder, with ever new strategies and freshly fabricated theologies to ensure that we will be there long into the future. The Curia and some members of the US Bishops' Conference appear to be disturbed by the way many communities of apostolic religious women have developed governance models based on mutuality and partnership with members, including consultation, consensus-building and discernment, as well as leadership teams (composed of a president

<sup>4</sup> Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 90–124, here 115.

and team members) who also prefer such procedures of shared authority even for routine matters not specified as requiring the consent of the team, instead of ‘major superiors and their councils’.

### **Women’s Experience**

What then is the experience of women as they encounter the Principle and Foundation within the Spiritual Exercises, and how might it differ from that of men?

In 1992 I co-authored an essay wondering if ‘the option for the poor’, made by the bishops at Medellín and later adopted in the context of the Jesuit commitment to social justice, ought to be explicitly embraced as an option for women, since women and their children constitute the overwhelming number of the poor worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Women remain ‘invisible’ within the category of the ‘poor’, although they experience poverty and powerlessness in specifically gendered ways.

When I made the Spiritual Exercises at the beginning of graduate studies I was not yet self-consciously a feminist, but it was very clear to me in the meditations on the incarnation that if Jesus was really going to go all the way to the bottom of the social ladder in embracing our world, he should have become a woman. The way of Jesus is dramatically off



<sup>5</sup> Janet K. Ruffing and Theresa Moser, ‘An Option for Women?’ *The Way Supplement*, 74 (Summer 1992), 89–100.

the ladder altogether, yet all of us are shaped by what we have come to take for granted, or to resist, as our place in the world.

When women make the Exercises, we bring to this experience our sense of ourselves as women. But is it entirely appropriate for women to espouse a preference for poverty rather than riches, sickness rather than health, dishonour rather than honour, a short life rather than a long one? Many women, in many parts of the world, already live with such circumstances. The antidote to male privilege, or for that matter any privilege, reorders an individual's place in the world along the lines of *kenosis*—downward mobility. Consequently, indifference always leans towards the opposite of a particular privilege. But making women's experience explicit by recognising that a woman's place in the social world and church world is not the same as a man's will reorder her place in the world so as to *ennoble* her sense of self.

There is no woman I have ever met who has not been touched by gender discrimination, no matter how successful, privileged or talented. In my classes, which include women and men from all over the world, I find that the Brazilian Yvone Gebara's analysis of the effect of gender on women of all social classes is wholly cross-culturally accessible. At its core, being gendered female in patriarchal societies results in the persistent experience of guilt, of feeling that we are not good enough, of there being something wrong with us that cannot be remedied. These disempowering feelings are not based on any specific actions we have done, so we feel we cannot change or repair the situation.<sup>6</sup> This wounding is more than simply internalised psychological inferiority resulting from assimilating one's 'place' in patriarchy. It is also profoundly wounding spiritually of a woman's feminine soul. Marguerite Porete describes one possible resolution of this wounding, and Beverly Lanzetta another.

I find it very interesting that a thirteenth-century mystical text, written by a woman, describes the indifference to outward circumstances as the fruit of mystical transformation, rather than as an attitude to cultivate. For a woman, rather than preferring poverty to wealth and so on, transformation results in her not getting caught up in either. God suffices. A woman (or man) is not to settle for shame or poverty or

<sup>6</sup> Yvone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 61–92.

anxiety, but also not to get trapped in any of them either. This is the same interior freedom that Ignatius desires for men by his strategy of imagined, but not permanent, downward mobility. A woman arrives at indifference or equilibrium differently since her 'place' in patriarchy is unlikely to affirm the positive side of these polarities as an enduring experience. Marguerite Porete places these words on the lips of Love (the Holy Spirit), and describes the transformed person in this way:

This Soul, says Love, takes account of neither shame nor honor, of neither poverty nor wealth, of neither anxiety nor ease, of neither love nor hate, of neither hell nor of paradise.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Dark Night of the Feminine***

Beverly Lanzetta describes women mystics as passing through a 'dark night of the feminine'. This she describes as an added step of passive purification in women's spiritual journeys:

It specifically locates a woman's struggle to achieve fullness of being within her soul's internalization of the misogyny particular to her world and God's suffering of the violation of her womanhood.<sup>8</sup>

This is a paradoxical situation that is eventually healed only through mystical experience.

The soul suffers the afflictions of its most receptive and intimate nature, in terms of both the negative wounding sustained from the violence of the world and the positive touching of Divine wisdom that opens it to deeper reserves of communion and oneness.<sup>9</sup>

The first transformative movement for many women is coming into the fullness of their graced selfhood, into a genuine freedom for God, for self and for others. Lanzetta, I believe, rightly describes the mystical process of transformation in becoming divine (made fully in God's image) through which feminist women pass, and for which I had not previously had a

<sup>7</sup> Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated and introduced by Ellen L. Babinsky (New York and Mahwah: Paulist, 1993), 84. For further discussion of Marguerite Porete, see Juan Miguel Marín, 'A Beguine's Spectre: Marguerite Porete (†1310), Achille Gagliardi (†1607) and Their Collaboration across Time', below, xxx.

<sup>8</sup> Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 125.

<sup>9</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 125.



*St Teresa of Ávila*

name. This is a particular suffering experienced by women who resist our allotted place, and who suffer the disfigurement of God's image in us after a feminist awakening.<sup>10</sup>

Using Teresa of Ávila as a case study Lanzetta describes three stages through which Teresa passes.

In the first she confronts her alienation from her self, her friendships and interests, her 'womanish' weaknesses, and her lack of confidence in her own way. In the second phase, she suffers alienation from God due to her extreme lack of self-worth and belief that, as a woman, she is unworthy of receiving God's love and intimacy.

Yet through this process, 'she becomes more certain of her path, even rejecting the advice and criticism of male confessors'. During the third movement, she,

... suffers the offense of clerics who brand her divine graces as visitations 'from the devil' and attempt to curtail her thought. She experiences

<sup>10</sup> Lanzetta discusses the harm done to women under the rubric of 'spiritual oppression': 'Women's spiritual oppression, because it injures the site of a person's greatest holiness, sensitivity, and mutuality—their relationship with God—is frequently an unnamed, forbidden territory. The possession of women's ability to be relational, receptive, and vulnerable—to reflect an outpouring of Divine intimacy—is a form of spiritual violence maintained through complex relationships of shame and blame. Women's openness and vulnerability are possessed through the same dynamics of domination and subordination that mark unequal sexual relations.' (70–71)



the most profound desolation of her life: complete abandonment and estrangement as she struggles to reconcile the world's debasement of her with Jesus' unqualified love and encouragement. It is from these experiences that Teresa eventually becomes boldly empowered, speaking out for the rights of women and girls, *conversos* and her Carmelite Sisters.<sup>11</sup>

I want to highlight two points that Lanzetta is making. First, she recognises that women suffer soul wounds in patriarchy.<sup>12</sup> Feminism as a social movement alone cannot relieve these soul wounds, which can only be healed through mystical experience. God moves towards women to heal their wounds and empower them into a graced fullness of life. This experience of Divine embrace eventually remakes the feminine self according to the image of God that we, as women, actually bear in our bodies and souls. Secondly, as women we are the image of the feminine Divine in our persons. The spiritual attack against women, both overtly and subtly, is rooted in the rejection by men (and women allied with them) of God precisely as feminine.

### ***Paying More Attention to the Self***

For women, the context for mission and election is God's deepening God's own life in us. As the feminine self becomes more securely a self, enjoying the freedom of being a daughter of God and beloved of God, our work in the world and in our communities flows from this personal relationship. As the authors of *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed* write:

Many women may feel called to pay more attention to self as a prelude to paying attention to God, to discover for the first time—or all over again—the God present within the mystery of one's self.<sup>13</sup>

About eighteen years ago Sister Karen Doyle wrote a paraphrase of the Principle and Foundation from God's point of view that places it in

<sup>11</sup> Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> Ignatius' pedagogy in the Principle and Foundation addresses the way men need to resist being shaped by patriarchy in their desires. He leans against the benefits for men of their unconscious identification with a system that favours them. I leave it to the male reader to sort out how patriarchy harms him.

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist, 2002), 100.

a profoundly relational context.<sup>14</sup> Her God is not a patriarch but a lover in search of a beloved, who confers dignity and worth, and invites the woman into deeper intimacy.

..... [Your name], the goal of your life is to live with me forever. I gave you life because I love you. Your response of love allows my life to flow into you without limit.

All the things in this world are my gifts, presented to you so that you can know me more easily and return your love to me more readily.

I want you to appreciate and use all my gifts in so far as they help you develop as a loving person. But if any of my gifts become the centre of your life, they displace me and so hinder your growth towards your goal.

In everyday life, then, you must hold yourself in balance before all of my created gifts in so far as you have a choice and are not bound by some obligation. You should not fix your desire on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in you a deeper response to your life in me.

Your only desire and one choice should be this: to want and to choose what better leads to my deepening my life in you.<sup>15</sup>

Notice how this version of the Principle and Foundation captures God’s initiative in moving towards the retreatant in love. This movement towards relationship and towards trusting God’s unconditional loving and co-creating is the core dynamic from which everything else emerges. We can understand this as participating in Trinitarian communion.

Receiving this gift of lavish love is not easy for many. The Dutch Jesuit Peter van Breeman never tires of encouraging self-acceptance and helping directees to overcome obstacles in their lives that prevent them from accepting themselves and welcoming God’s acceptance. In his most recent book, *The God of Our Deepest Longings*, he returns to this theme. He writes, ‘... every person is a “wanted child”, willed and affirmed by God’. This contains an undreamt-of source of encouragement

<sup>14</sup> Karen Doyle is currently on the staff at Inisfada, St Ignatius Retreat House, Manhassat, New York, and uses this version of the Principle and Foundation together with the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* in training people to direct the Exercises..

<sup>15</sup> ‘A Retreatant’s Prayer’, cited in Elisabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 37.

for accepting ourselves. The first act of adoring God consists in accepting the fact that we come from God's hand. Van Breeman cites Edith Stein:

[Our] love is entirely directed to God, but in union with divine love the created spirit also embraces itself in recognition, in free and happy affirmation, of itself. Surrender to God is at the same time surrender to one's own God-loved Self and the whole Creation.<sup>16</sup>

This quotation from Stein illustrates the movement of the feminine into God. Union with divine love enables the female created spirit to embrace herself as well as God. Her female selfhood expands, and deepens; in this context surrender to God is not hostile to or against the self, but is also a surrender to the self as loved by God and, interestingly, to the whole of creation. There is no either/or choice. The God-loved, God-embraced self continues to relate to herself and to the whole creation from this new position within the Divine embrace. Such selves become empowered to co-operate with God towards more just systems and towards a better life for the many. Moreover this insight about the healing of personhood can also be extended beyond the experience of women to anyone in a marginalised, oppressed situation.

### ***The New Cosmology and Right Relationship with the Creation***

In addition to an explicitly feminist awareness of women's experience as women making the Exercises, for many years now, the experience of both men and women in making the Exercises has been dramatically enhanced by an appropriation of the new cosmology and of an ecological ethic. Already in the 1970s, feminists were making the connection between the treatment of the earth and the looming ecological devastation predicted by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*, and the treatment of women. Very soon, it became almost impossible for feminists not to be ecofeminists: to see and make explicit this connection and to call for a reordering of social and economic systems in order to support the flourishing of girl children, women and the earth.<sup>17</sup> Fully incorporating the new cosmology

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Peter van Breeman, *The God of Our Deepest Longings: Seven Biblical Meditations* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2009), 40.

<sup>17</sup> See Mary Grey, *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) and Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) for ecofeminist liberation theologies. For a short, accessible approach to cosmology and Christology, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'An Earthy Christology', *America* (13 April 2009), 27–30.

and an ecological ethic radically alters the way we know the creation, the way we understand ourselves as human persons, and the way we understand God.

These new understandings saturate our experience of the content of the meditations in the Spiritual Exercises on God's activity in the world, creation, incarnation, redemption and our ongoing, graced co-labouring with Jesus in the salvation and restoration, not only of the human life of the world but also of creation itself. Within the new story of the cosmos, God's Holy creative Spirit is at work in creation, brooding over the chaos from which all life forms emerge, interconnected in the great web of life. This mysterious, beautiful, terrible, wondrous planet on which we live, within an expanding universe that represents the inexhaustible and ongoing creation of God, is God's first sacrament—God's first self-revelation to human persons. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, and senses with which to feel it, we can only be astonished by it.

Ineluctable this shimmering of wind in the blue leaves:  
this flood of stillness widening the lake of sky:  
this need to dance,  
this need to kneel:  
this mystery:

The cosmos is God's body, just as the human body of Jesus is God made flesh. As the holiness of the whole of creation dawns on us, we are called to an entirely different relationship with created things. They serve more than an instrumental purpose for humans. They are no longer merely to be used by us; every living thing in this web of life and death and new life has intrinsic value. We are not over and apart from them, rather we are dependent on this beauty, this utility, this communion with all that is. And we bear responsibility for its ability to live and flourish into the future. This creation, no less than ourselves, looks forward with resurrection hope to the new creation that will surely not be any less stunning than the one we now inhabit. Everything will be changed and transformed, not only the human. The earth itself, ravaged by our disordered greed and inability to live in right relationship, has now become one of the 'poor', and requires our conscious action on its behalf. This will require a total conversion in our way of life, especially for those shaped by the excesses of the developed world.

These themes are named over and over again in ecofeminist theology and in systematic theology as we reshape our theological ideas

on the basis of our current scientific understanding of the universe— incredible complexity, incredible evolution, incredible beauty, incredible interdependence of all life forms, incredible transmutations of energy evolving new life forms, and incredible choice as we discover that God has more than one plan. We now live in a ‘multiple chance universe’,<sup>18</sup> where many dreams may be in harmony with God’s.

### ***The Hidden Heart of the Universe***

If we interpret this abundance as God’s solicitation of us, God’s luring us into relationship, God’s deepest longing and desire for us evoking our own, we discover that, indeed, love, Divine Love, is at the heart of all that is and that we are called to participate in it. This is our new Principle and Foundation to discover how to live in the embrace of this creation, in the arms of this God, with the entire human family. Angelus Silesius said long ago, ‘There is still nothing here more beautiful than I am, because God, beauty itself, has fallen in love with me’.<sup>19</sup> This beauty that is myself, experienced through and through as a result of the graces of the Exercises is now no longer something private but a wondrous experience of communion.

I end these ecofeminist reflections with a version of the Principle and Foundation written by one of my Fordham colleagues, Vivienne Joyce, addressed to God as ‘Hidden Heart of the Universe’. I think it is the most fitting and evocative way to recapitulate the themes I have described in relation to the way women today (and many men as well, I imagine) might pray, in the course of the Exercises, about our new place in the world from which all of our co-labouring with Christ for the well-being of the world and all its life forms issues.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wilkie Au, *By Way of the Heart: Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1989), 65.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Van Breeman, *God of Our Deepest Longings*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Vivienne Joyce, SC, 2007. ‘Love inventive to Infinity’ is a Vincentian name for God.

*Hidden Heart of the Universe*

*Open our hearts to a deepening realisation of  
Your continuous creation of all that is.*

*Renew us daily in Your love.*

*May our reverence for all creation energize deeds of  
Affective and effective loving.*

*Incarnate in Jesus, you call us friends not servants.*

*You draw close to us, are one with us in the passionate vulnerability  
of the human heart of Jesus.*

*Enliven our desire to join our vulnerability to yours so that*

*We may act justly and love tenderly and*

*Bring about the realisation of Your Dream.*

*With a freedom born of your Loving initiative*

*May I understand my life as Eucharist and break open in compassion  
In You, through You and with You.*

*May we make of our lives a Eucharist*

*Celebrating relationships of equality, solidarity and mutuality.*

*We see the patterns of human exploitation of the earth increase the  
Suffering of the Poor.*

*Help me to live simply and humbly*

*And accept my personal/communal failure*

*To understand my place in the universe and my responsibility to enjoy and  
appreciate even, as I participate in your ongoing creation.*

*O Sophia, Creator of all life's wonders.*

*Transform our living. Draw us each day into the More of You*

*Whose kindness is a greater good than life.*

*Weaver of Life, Receiver of Death*

*Help me to live simply and humbly*

*And accept my personal/communal failure*

*You teach us time and Eternity and the Blessing of Change.*

*Strengthen my faith in your Presence in the midst of all forms of suffering,  
injustice, tragedy and disasters of our time and our particular place.*

*Increase my hope.*

*Inspire my action and my inaction, O Love inventive to Infinity. Amen.*