

# CREATIVE LONELINESS

By WILLIAM HEWETT

EVERY GENERATION must re-interpret its tradition or perish. History must be constantly rewritten, or it will certainly degenerate into bunk, boredom and total irrelevance. Every decade needs a new and different 'Hamlet'; and sometimes an older setting speaks more loudly to a modern audience. And sometimes it does the reverse. This is true of our spiritual history and tradition: for example, the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius can, more easily perhaps than most other guides to the spiritual ascent, become the highway to nowhere. And when they are so treated, they cease to be creative, leading to that kind of loneliness which not only isolates but alienates. In recent years this particular spiritual map has been studied with fresh insights, and a new generation of guides has emerged; one that can better interpret the route for those who choose to follow it, with an individually discerning presence, and enable the traveller to make the journey his own; to progress from the mere loneliness of a routine and depressing journey to one that, though remaining solitary, is creative, exciting and fruitful. This essay suggests a further step that might be taken along the 'directed-non-directed' route.

At first hearing, however, 'creative loneliness' sounds an unlikely combination of ideas. Loneliness most of us fear; to be alone is not good for man; the loneliness of the old, the young, or for that matter, the middle-aged, is one of the much publicized problems of our time. Not only does it sound unlikely. In the modern context it would seem to lack any appeal, since the emphasis just now is on the group or team. The Council has insisted on collegiality and shared responsibility. Spiritual government and renewal-programmes are now opening out to provincial teams, shared-prayer and group-therapy, teams of gurus and community retreats. Groups, it would seem, are too busy meeting groups for there to be time or energy left for anything as outdated as creative loneliness. And even were it less unlikely-sounding and more desirable, it seems, in fact, virtually impossible. Even were there time for creative loneliness, the potential for it seems to be vanishing. Ponder the case of the young seminarian who said he found it impossible to pray or even reflect alone; he had to be in a group.

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Certainly the Church retains an immense respect and reverence for the vocation to the solitary life, which expresses this creative loneliness in the old paradox *nunquam minus solus quam solus*. The Pope of *aggiornamento*, John XXIII, made a solemn and public appeal to contemplatives and solitaires at the beginning of the Council, stressing their crucial role in the renewal and updating so necessary to the Church in the modern world. It may be that the sort of aloneness required by such openness to the Spirit is out of fashion; but I am by no means sure that it is therefore inappropriate to our times, or to be restricted to *ex professo* contemplatives. Maybe we need a little of that discernment that can endure through the initial feeling of desolation at the thought of aloneness; one that is not afraid, at least at certain times, to sing outside the currently fashionable group chorus. Solitude versus community, loneliness versus togetherness, inwardness versus outwardness: these antinomies are too glib and too naïve to be trusted in practice. What needs to be discerned is the appropriate time, places and structures for each to find expression. There is also a basic human need for this aloneness, and an instinctive awareness that it offers opportunities for growth. (And it would be another glib antimony to oppose the basically human and the religious. The religious sense cannot exist without the human.) Nor does one need any great power of discernment to catch the desperation concealed behind the search which modern man is making for an aloneness in which he can rediscover his soul and let it breathe again.

But it is one thing to admit that there might after all be a need for a certain kind of aloneness, and quite another to see how loneliness can in fact be creative. We need to clarify what it is we are looking for when we search for an aloneness that is creative.

Our images will vary. For some the notion of creative loneliness may suggest bleak moors, or deep dark wells, or meandering rivers; for others, lonely islands; streams of traffic, making for the sea; back to nature and that simple thatched cottage; green thoughts in green shades, or a lonely climb up Carmel; back to the cell or the silent twilit chapel. Images are important: much of their importance lies in their ambiguity and incompleteness. Our discontent with any one image's ability to catch our meaning is in this case indicative that the loneliness we seek is more than fantasy, more than discontent, more than escape, more, even, than the traditional asceticism; more than being on your own, in a beautiful environment, praying or seemingly praying, if it is to have a full and fair chance of being

creative. Creative loneliness thus needs a technique if it is both to get off the ground and not fly off into fantasy.

The word technique may for many smack too much of structure, manipulation, pelagian muscularity in an area too sensitive and delicate to be treated that way. We are peculiarly on our guard against manipulating techniques, and particularly in prayer. (It will have become clear by now that for the christian, at least, creative loneliness is intimately involved with prayer.) In fact, the traditional (though often uninformed) objection to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius is about technique. Technique in this context has a death-knell ring about it: echoes of Fr Roothaan's reduction of the Exercises to a kind of inquisition – that head-breaking world of preludes, compositions of place, colloquies, repetitions and so on. Techniques to make loneliness creative would seem about as unwelcome as those methods that made of prayer a dehumanized mechanical nightmare.

Here again discernment is needed: it is the abuse of techniques – for example the ultimately lazy over-reliance on any one method, or its slavishly-blind application – that reduces a process to an uncreative ritual. Technique itself (like structure) has a vital part to play if we are not to fall into a modern version of angelism disguised as liberalism. A technician who is aware of the dangers of techniques can be a most helpful guide. Ignatius, rightly understood, was one such. For the Exercises, rather like some Mannerist painting techniques, invite the participant to see through and beyond these techniques. This comes out repeatedly, particularly in the annotations and the additions. The person must go over the matter and reflect on it by himself, seeking interior understanding and appreciation (Exx 2). Each one must search, by trial and error, to find what he personally is looking for (Exx 4); whilst the director is warned to leave the person to work directly with his creator and Lord (Exx 15).

The whole of Ignatius's thought is redolent with this first principle: experiment, reflect and so discover what helps or hinders, what can be used again or left aside.

Ignatius, as we know, never proposed any method or technique for others without having experimented with it first himself. It has recently been noticed that there is an intrinsic connection between his Exercises and those pages of his spiritual diary which have come down to us.<sup>1</sup> (There is a similar correlation between the Testament

<sup>1</sup> Cf Munitiz, J.: 'The Spiritual Diary of St Ignatius Loyola', in *Supplement to The Way*, 16 (Summer 1972), pp 105 ff.

dictated to Gonçalves da Câmara and the Exercises.) Spiritual journals have a very respectable history, reaching from the *Confessions* of St Augustine to *The Diary of a Country Priest* of Georges Bernanos. As a literary genre, their power to communicate depths of spiritual awareness and experience are perhaps unparalleled. It may be that the very power of such works tends to frighten off lesser mortals like ourselves, who usually associate diary-keeping with the despairs and raptures of adolescence, which are best forgotten. Either way, it is unlikely that we will turn naturally to the journal as a way of making loneliness or anything else, creative. We can, however, invoke the experience of Ignatius: he expected others besides himself to make the Spiritual Exercises; and he clearly uses his diary to attain and to develop his own creative techniques.

One particularly significant modern development of the use of the technique of the diary in the context of personal inner experience is the *Intensive Journal* of Ira Progoff. The present writer is convinced that this technique can have an important bearing on the giving and making of the Spiritual Exercises, in that it can be of immense help in making the lonely business of praying more creative and fruitful. Clearly, however, the *Intensive Journal* is not being offered either as a substitute or a take-over of the authentic ignatian Exercises, even understood, in the light of the Spiritual Diary, as a record and process of spiritual experience. It is notoriously difficult to do descriptive justice to this kind of experience. Indeed, this very difficulty of expressing in any way our very real but equally elusive inner experiences is one of Dr Progoff's main concerns. It is precisely to integrate our inner and outer experiences that the *Intensive Journal* technique has been devised.<sup>2</sup> Description of the process is of course at least one degree removed from the experience itself. (There is an immediate parallel with the *Exercises*: it is not a book to be read but to be experienced with the help of a guide.) However, a brief description must be attempted.

Imagine a large room; a group of people are seated fairly comfortably all facing towards the speaker's chair. The group is not homogeneous, but offers every conceivable variety: colour, creed, age, with academic or professional qualifications or the lack of them, and so on. Each receives a large loose-leaf file, in which are four main sections, with a number of subsections. The leader of the group

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<sup>2</sup> The experience as such is described by Dr Progoff in his book *At a Journal Workshop* (New York, 1975).

first talks in general about the journal and its purpose; he speaks easily, using many images. We are like wells, he tells us, and each of us can work down to the stream which feeds the well. Our inner experience is like smoke: unless we can somehow shape it, it vanishes. Inner experience is invaluable but elusive. The techniques of the journal are ways which help us not so much to capture, as shape, interconnect, bring to light and fuller life our inmost beings. It is a way of helping us grow. At the heart of the method is the feedback (which is similar to the various repetitions of the Exercises and the application of the rules for discerning the spirits).

The four main sections of the journal delineate areas of increasing depth of awareness: at the first level, there are daily and period logs. This is where many a diary begins and ends. In the Intensive Journal, however, these provide the raw materials for further discovery. (Again the parallel with ignatian method is striking: reflection on theological truths, contemplation of the gospel-mysteries are similarly material for personal appropriation.)

The next main section is what Progoff calls the Dialogue Dimension, which contains at least five 'special personal sections', giving us room to dialogue with the persons in our lives (whether dead or alive), the works we are involved in, society, events, and our own bodies. These dialogue-scripts can both crystallize and open up our inner attitudes and feelings towards all these personal aspects of our lives. The third section is the Depth Dimension: it deals with dreams and dream enlargements, twilight imagery and imagery extensions, and the stages of inner wisdom. The purpose here is not to analyse, but to permit these normally unconscious or repressed parts of our experience a certain freedom to lead where they will, and so uncover whole areas of unsuspected meaning, aim and energy. Finally we reach the Life/Time dimension, whose three sections are entitled 'Stepping Stones', 'Intersections', 'Now: The Open Moment'. These are headings under which the shape of our inner life can be recalled, and in that process given a movement which indicates both a present meaning and a future direction.

The purpose of the journal-workshop is to familiarize oneself with these various sections of the journal, to begin to use them and write in them, whilst sharing in the group-silence. This concentrated attention of the group is an important element, and resembles the atmosphere of silence in a retreat or in the silent parts of the liturgy. The leader gives the introductory explanation, then lapses into long stretches of silence so that the participants can work on

their own. It is a relaxed and refreshing silence, which appears to be, for many, genuinely creative.

The above description may well sound rather self-conscious, even a little precious or strange. But the workshop does seem to have a certain directness and simplicity which proves more effective than many more sophisticated means. One of its most attractive traits is the total freedom of the whole process: the diary is private; nobody is analysing anybody; nobody is being judged or categorized; the headings are not judgmental categories but indications of interconnecting areas of the heart, the inwardness of a person – any person. Attractive too is the combination of a definite structure with real open-endedness: both moving and yet not arriving, which is precisely the reality of our lives and the elusiveness of them.

Students of psychology will be quick to recognize the thought of C. G. Jung in much of this, particularly in what is said about Depth Dimension in this exploration of the nature of the self; and Proggoff has frequently acknowledged it.<sup>3</sup> Those of us whose theological and spiritual formation has been profoundly influenced by over-sharp distinctions between natural and supernatural, nature and grace, may feel more than a touch of uneasiness here.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Victor White has observed, much of Jung's reflections on the fundamental nature of the self as the *imago Dei* echoes the teaching of christian writers like Walter Hilton, who speaks of the christian's inner pilgrimage to God as a progressive reform in feeling, consequent on reform in faith.<sup>5</sup> A recent assessment by the catholic jungian psychologist, Vera von der Heydt, is of particular relevance here. She writes:

Much confusion has arisen from this idea (the experience of the transpersonal power, the image of God within) as many people believe that Jung equated God with the experience of the divine image within the Self. An extract from a letter clarifies the point: 'God himself has created the soul and its archetypes. We are dealing with what is the image of God and is numinous in God's own name. Trouble arises because critics have not themselves experienced the numinous character of the archetype of the Self. By this experience, we feel, in fact, as though touched by some divine power. Of course our symbols are

<sup>3</sup> Cf *At a Journal Workshop*, p 41, note.

<sup>4</sup> On this and other relevant points of connection between theology and modern psychology in its pioneering forms, the late Fr. Victor White's *God and the Unconscious* (London, 1964) remains valuable.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 99.

not God. When I as a psychologist speak of God, I am speaking of a psychological image. Similarly the Self is a psychological image of human wholeness, and it is also of something transcendental because it is indescribable and incomprehensible. We observe that both are expressed by identical symbols, or by symbols so alike as to be indistinguishable'. Jung ends this letter: 'The best I can do is to have an image, and I am not the idiot to say that the image I behold in the mirror is my real, living, Self'.

This is not to say, of course, that Jung necessarily succeeded in reaching the position of the classical image-theology; nor necessarily does Progoff, who lays no claim to be writing or speaking in a specifically christian context. But it remains true that the goal of every spiritual exercise, as of every authentic therapeutic process, is to assist the 'self' to grow in freedom to maturity: in christian terms, for the image to be restored and the likeness to expand. It is common both to idolatry and psychological sickness to worship static and fossilized images, whether of God or of the self. The healing pain of the cross and the pain of psychological maturation also have this in common, in that they both demand a willingness to go on growing when circumstances are adverse and instinct says that I should already have arrived. The choice of a static or final negative state is the ultimate in sinful self-love, the refusal to be a pilgrim.

A more relevant objection concerns the discernment of self-growth. We are all aware of the harm that can be caused by misunderstanding or mishandling the techniques of the Spiritual Exercises. Here the spiritual director may have something to learn from the Intensive Journal, whose fundamental principle demands that the facilitator refrain from imposing his own views and interpretations, but simply to let the self find its true self. This is a process of integration, not dissection.

More positively, the Journal resembles the Exercises in respecting the freedom of the individual in the actual process of growth and development in and through heightened awareness, a more full and authentic presence in the stream of deeper living. Both techniques, each in their different ways, are aimed at enabling a person to become convinced that he can and should, with a real confidence, discern his own spirits. The Journal, no less than the Exercises, is not here preaching an arrogant independence, but a true humility in the process of growth towards spiritual and psychological maturity. Here St Ignatius's own experience of being touched by God provides us with an illuminating example. Renowned for his economy

with words, he thought it sufficiently important to record that this experience happened while he was gazing at the river Cardoner, 'which there ran deep'. It would not be fanciful to conclude that Ignatius was seeing the river as the external symbol of his sight of the internal depths. God's action, the sight of the sun on the deep river, the progressively more inward awareness: all these were inter-related and mutually enriching factors of the experience. Most significantly, he records that after Cardoner he reached an important stepping-stone in his spiritual Aeneid: he depended far less on external guides, far more on his own ability to discern the spirits. He became so aware of his interior processes, of what was going on in his 'self', that the meaning and direction of his life, and his joy and consolation in it, was always thereafter clear to him.

Another significant link between the Journal and the Exercises concerns the all-important second annotation, whose implications were so long neglected by many jesuit retreat givers. As we have noticed, the key words are 'discussing and reasoning by himself'. Implied here is the whole world of appropriation through dialogue: inner dialogue, as opposed to the blind acceptance of imposing oratory or the more subtle forms of brainwashing. The journal supplies the precise techniques for these inner dialogues without any form of manipulation. Here above all is the clue to creative loneliness: the discovery in the Spirit, and before the Lord, through dialogue and reflection caught in writing even as it happens. Here is a way of 'savouring the matter internally', both in the moment of each experience, and in later reflection on, and evocations from, what was written.

The sections of the Journal on dialogue are analogous to Ignatius's understanding of colloquy: 'To make a colloquy is simply to talk, just as one friend talks with another . . . he tells him about his concerns . . . (Exx 54). Progoff develops this into what seems to be a fruitful application of the Principle and Foundation: to dialogue with all things is to use them rightly, to recognize their ultimately personal quality, that they are not simply created but being created; to be in dialogue with them is to be re-created oneself. This expression of appreciative awareness of the presence of creatures, and the attempt to foster a growing right relationship with them, makes for a better quality of life.

The 'depth' sections enable us to enter into the inwardness of our actual experience. This surely is at the root of any personal authenticity. Without it we are condemned to a half-life, or a parasitic one.



This inward appropriation through fuller individuation and deeper relating is common both to spiritual and psychological growth.

Here again the technique, the process of appropriation, in both Exercises and the Journal, show, a remarkable similarity. In the Exercises it is called repetition, reflection, rumination; in the Journal it goes by the rather ugly name, 'feedback': to set down in writing what you feel about a particular experience, and later what you feel about what you have written about the experience. Gradually, through this process of integrating and inter-relating repetition, aloneness becomes creative; it disposes to the natural state of the healthy self. By means of this dialogue with the self and 'feeding back' the beginnings of desolating experiences, these can become creative. 'Ought not the Christ to have suffered and so enter his glory?', said the risen Jesus as he reflected on his experiences 'in the days of his flesh'.

The Journal method could also give us a clearer understanding of what St Ignatius means by re-ordering the affections. It is all too easy to interpret this process in too moralistic, and at times too pelagian a sense. Analysing out the areas of one's sinfulness, expressing sorrow and amendment, have their important place. But there is far more involved in this re-ordering. Traditionally, the *affectus animae* is the name given to those dynamic areas of the self (heart) which are the source of particular disorderly actions and attitudes. We can experience forgiveness and healing only to the extent that we are in touch with these areas of the inner self.

The sections of the Journal on what Progoff calls the depth dimension – dreams, twilight imagery and inner wisdom, provide what appears to be a psychological counterpart to spiritual experiences like the Cardoner vision. Through the medium of symbol, whether dreamed or daydreamed, experienced poetically or peripherally, we have another way into the deeper areas of self, where the affections can be freed, as a vital step towards their re-ordering. By transposing cerebral statements or problems into their root affective keys by the medium of symbol presented in dreams or waking (twilight) imagery, a whole new area of self is brought into conscious awareness, and in the process is empowered for that 'more abundant life' which is the goal of the reordination.

In practice, then, the use of the Intensive Journal could help considerably towards reshaping, in a modern idiom, the techniques of retreat-giving, particularly the ignatian Exercises when they are given over a very long period, according to the directives in the

nineteenth annotation (which has been called recently 'Exercises dans la vie courante'). Progoff's book and diary could certainly be useful as a basic introduction to the Exercises, and as initiating a process that could be employed both during the retreat and more especially afterwards. It would thus help to overcome one of the classic problems of retreats: the relationship of the retreat experience to the return to everyday reality.<sup>6</sup> It could also go a long way to solving the current discussion among spiritual directors about how to be both director and non-directive at the same time.

One last question: can the Intensive Journal techniques effect directly that often very lonely and all too uncreative period of actual prayer? Certainly they can, if one is speaking of prayer in its broader sense: the process of growing in the right use of creatures, of becoming a truly loving person. If one means by prayer that deep surrender in faith to the presence of God, the answer is not so clear. In this instance it may be that the attempt to capture the experience as it is given and received would be an abuse of the experience: the Song of Songs was not actually written in the beloved's physical presence, nor were Shakespeare's sonnets. Tedious and uncreative though it might seem, the loneliness of formal prayer times should probably not be alleviated by having the pen and diary to hand (though it is said to have been John Henry Newman's regular practice at meditation). But enough has been said, I hope, to indicate that the Journal could be extremely fruitful in all our times of personal reflection, and particularly after regular and formal contemplative prayer, such as retreat times, when we should confidently expect our aloneness to be truly creative.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf Earle, G.: 'The Annual Retreat: present and future', in *Supplement to the Way*, 16 (Summer, 1972), pp 99-100.