DO TEDDY BEARS MAKE GOOD SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS?

Ignatius Loyola Meets Donald Winnicott

Brendan Callaghan

MY FIRST TEACHER OF PSYCHOLOGY SAW IT AS AN AXIOM that 'the facts are friendly'—that is, that good science should point us towards the same reality as Christian reflection and insight. I would want to hold to that principle as being not only axiomatic, but also demonstrable. Good psychology is not antagonistic to religion, (any more than a good psychotherapist is). Though Freud was an atheist and saw religion as essentially a neurosis, he also recognised that his own system would nevertheless be used as a tool for greater understanding by those sympathetic to religion.

As a Jesuit and a psychologist, I share the belief that my Master Ignatius was himself a fine psychologist, and that the same observation can be made of many (and perhaps all) of the outstanding pastoral figures in the life of the Christian community. Their psychology was not expressed in the language of the psychoanalytic consulting room, nor of the experimental laboratory, to be sure; but the best psychology rarely is.

It seems to me, too, that the traditional insights of the Christian community, as expressed by some of its outstanding members, come together with the best of what psychology has to offer us, particularly once we start looking at the question of what makes for genuine human growth, growth understood in the light of faith, growth *sub specie aeternitatis*. So I want to look at some aspects of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola in terms of what some psychologists, and particularly some depth psychologists, have to say about processes of growth and transformation.

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The Exercises and Freedom

The tools which help me to make the Exercises are simple and traditional: imaginative engagement with gospel events and other events in the life of Jesus; thoughtful and prayerful reflection on a few key Christian images; prayerful attention to my own faith-story; and, crucially, the willingness to be aware of how I react to these various exercises, of what sort of response they elicit in me at the deeper levels of my experience. It seems to me that we can speak of two tasks here: the first is immersing myself in gospel events by prayerful fantasy; the second is allowing myself to recognise the ways in which God has been and is tangibly present in my life. Ignatius presents me with exercises: imaginative contemplations on gospel scenes, rememberings of my own life-story, reflections on aspects of Christian life embedded in vivid imagery. None of these, as I understand them, are primarily intellectual exercises, if we understand 'intellectual' in a detached, rationalistic sort of way. Each of them is intended to engage the whole of us, above all through our imaginations and through the life of the feelings, which our imaginations mobilise so effectively.

The Ignatian Exercises engage the whole person

Ignatius would have me recognise, not the general truths of our common belief, but the particular truths of how God engages with me, and how I both co-operate with and resist that engagement. For Ignatius, God calls me to become who I am capable of being: God works in particular ways in particular individuals. The US American monk Thomas Merton put it like this:

> It is true to say that for me sanctity consists in being myself, and for you sanctity consists in being yourself, and that in the last analysis your sanctity will never be mine, and mine will never be yours, except in the community of charity and grace. For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am, and of discovering my true self.[1]

David Lonsdale has this to say:

[1] Quoted in Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *A Sense of Sexuality: Christian Love and Intimacy* (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1994), p. 67.

> Taking possession of ourselves, telling, retelling and reflecting on the history of God's dealings with us, helps to set us on the road to freedom. True freedom is the ability to become the person God destined me to be; the capacity to allow my relationship with God—and hence the grace of God—to determine the shape and direction of my life.[2]

But this might just sound like a matter of autobiography—of coming to recognise and give an account of the events in my life as they have been influenced by the ever-present love of God. There is more to it than this. Taking possession of myself, I want to stress, is a hard and lengthy task, because it includes taking possession of my inner life as well as of that which can be narrated as events. It also includes coming to accept biases, preferences, and compulsions as aspects of myself, the causes of which may be so buried that I can never recover them. Freud says: 'To be completely honest with oneself is the very best effort a human can make'.[3]

Object-Relations Psychology

Freud's reductionism clearly belongs in a world very different from Ignatius' confidence in God's active presence within the self. Freud himself saw the fundamental powerhouse of human motivation as being a biological one—in the strict sense of the reduction of biologically driven tensions. But it was not very long before thinkers influenced by his insights developed alternative descriptions of human motivation, descriptions which they felt provided more adequate accounts. That the terms 'object' and 'Object-Relations' have become standard in describing these post-Freudian developments is unfortunate if by 'object' we are led to think in terms of the non-personal, of objects rather than people. The term refers, rather, to object as opposed to subject: Melanie Klein and later writers have been exploring the ways in which individuals learn to relate to 'that which is other-than-I'. Thinkers within the tradition of the Object-Relations school, itself largely a British phenomenon, have put great stress on the

[2] David Lonsdale, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1992), p. 29.
[3] Quoted in Abraham Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 57.

drive towards relationship as being fundamental in human development.

This stress on relationship (besides giving the Object-Relations school the second part of its name) shifts the fundamental locus of human motivation away from the strictly biological. This in turn makes it possible to develop a psychoanalytic account of aspects of human behaviour that do not seem to fit within a more reductionist or biological understanding other than as neurotic aberrations. If relationship is a key motivating factor in human life, then the range of ways in which human beings seek to form relationships becomes a legitimate field of study for others besides those with an interest in pathology.

Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) was a paediatrician-therapist who is perhaps best known for his oft-cited opinion that 'there is no such thing as a baby' (in which he was pointing out that what there *is* is mother-and-baby as one 'nursing couple'), and also for his notion of 'good-enough mothering'. While it has served to rescue innumerable women from the strain of trying to ensure that they were perfect mothers, Winnicott's term 'good enough' here has another reference, namely to the gradual process by which the infant comes to realise that it is not both all-powerful and coterminous with everything in its experience. To learn that I am separate and hence sometimes alone, to learn that I am not all-powerful and hence must sometimes be helpless—these are potentially terrifying transitions. But I must make them if I am to become a functioning adult in the world.

To learn that I am separate is potentially terrifying

Paradoxically, 'too-good mothering', in which all my needs are anticipated and met, makes this a more difficult task to complete. But normal experience does not include 'too-good mothering', and so I have to learn to cope with being alone and helpless as an infant. Typically I do this by means of a transitional object—something which is both 'out there' in the physical world and which carries significance for me in my internal world—an object which I both discover and create. This object also shares the crucial quality of the experience of my mother's breast: here too my 'creative' desire is matched by the 'discovery' of what another makes present. That I am not the creator ('The Creator') is something I have to learn, and it is a further irony that I typically learn this by creating—or rather by creating-and-discovering—a 'transitional object'. Linus, in the Peanuts cartoon strip,

has his blanket; one of my relatives had a little ball of cotton-wool; while another, growing up in the house of a religion teacher, had a fluffy toy cat called 'Grice' (as in 'Grice has died, Grice is risen, Grice will come again'). But the stereotype of the transitional object is the teddy bear.

The teddy bear exists in transitional or intermediate space: neither the 'autistic' totally internal space of my fantasy and imagination, nor the 'objective', measurable, replicable space of the outside world, but a space which is 'between'. The making of the transitional object is both creation and discovery—a fellow Jesuit and psychologist points out that the child creates the object out of the raw material provided by the outside world—but it is also the making of 'transitional space'. While the teddy-bear may get left behind (though some have hung around their partners for many decades, and one or two have been through the Spiritual Exercises), the capacity to live with or in transitional space does not die away, but rather 'spreads out' or diffuses. It is because I can operate in this 'between' space that I can sit with others in a concert hall and be moved by a piece of music, that I can engage with a novel or a poem or another human being—or with God. Culture, religion, art, love—all of these essentially human activities and experiences rely on my capacity to stay at the point of intersection between the outside and the inside, between the autistic and the objective. They depend on my capacity to play, to engage in a healthy manner with illusion.

For Freud, religion was both illusion and delusion—religious belief was based on wish fulfilment, and it was false, counter to reality. Illusion—belief based on wish fulfilment—has an essentially defensive role in Freud's psychology. It has a short term and necessary function of providing breathing-space, enabling me to gather enough strength to encounter the real. But it can all too easily slide into the longer term and always disabling function of providing me with a more acceptable alternative to the real (and thus making it unnecessary for me to move on to that adult encounter). But illusion as understood by Winnicott and others has a different and more positive role to play, and I would suggest that their understanding takes better account of the sophisticated levels at which even quite small children (as well as adults) can operate. The small child knows that their teddy bear was bought at Hamleys, or can be dry-cleaned; my relative knew that those little balls of cotton wool were quietly replaced as she slept once they

had begun to verge on being major health hazards; the opera-goer knows that Tosca will sing again tomorrow night, that Valhalla was not irrevocably consumed in flames. But small children and opera-goers also know that we are moved, touched, changed in significant ways—and that these experiences more often leave us better able to engage with reality than assist us to evade it. Illusion, in the Winnicottian sense, does not just have the quality of 'between' as in 'located between', but also as in 'leading between' or 'bridging between'.

It is important to realise that we are not talking about a 'third way' of knowledge here:

> To him [Winnicott] illusion is not an error but a source of truth. The creative intuition fostered in the transitional space is a crucial human form of knowing. . . . Contemporary philosophy of science, as summarised in a book authored jointly by a cognitive psychologist and a philosopher of science, converges with Winnicott's concern to transcend the dualism of objectivity and subjectivity and reinstate imaginative interaction as a source of knowledge . . . [4]

God and Transitional Relationships

The Argentinian-born psychoanalyst Ana-Maria Rizzuto has developed the language of Object-Relations in a way that allows us to look at the representations we have of God in a useful manner. She starts from the axiom that we relate to one another by means of the representations we have of each other—it is you-as-I-represent-you-to-myself that governs how I respond to you and relate to you. These representations can be 'located' in transitional space—they belong in that 'between' which is neither purely private nor simply public. We know from our own experience that how we represent a particular individual to ourselves is not static, and that it can get 'out-of-synch' with the reality of the individual, so that meeting them after a time can be a shock—pleasant or unpleasant. We also have a self-representation, and that also can stay more or less 'in synch' with our own reality.

[4] James W. Jones, 'Playing and Believing: D. W. Winnicott', in *Religion, Society and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Janet L. Jacobs and Donald Capps (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 106-126, here pp. 117-118.

John McDargh[5] suggests that Rizzuto's research findings about our representations of God can be summarised under three headings:

'1. No one coming to awareness in a society where the symbol "God" has any cultural currency is without a conscious or unconscious object representation of God.'

This is a bold assertion—but one supported both by her own research and by more general arguments resting on Winnicott's notions of how the child makes use of widely varied material in 'his or her creative weaving together of memorialised interpersonal experience and cultural interactions'. It is also an assertion that Rizzuto herself wants to see empirically investigated. It should be noted that she is not saying that all individuals somehow secretly or unconsciously believe in God, but rather that all individuals have a representation of God: non-believers, she points out, can tell you in great detail about the God they do not believe in.

'2. The object representations of God are not simply derived from the child's experience of the historical father, and once fashioned, they do not remain static and unchanging. Rather, they are available for further elaboration, revision, refashioning, or rejection in ways related to the function they are called upon to serve at any given moment.'

In her book *The Birth of the Living God*, Rizzuto puts these two together thus:

> It is a central thesis of this book that no child in the Western world brought up in ordinary circumstances completes the oedipal cycle without forming at least a rudimentary God-representation, which he may use for belief or not. The rest of developmental life may leave that representation untouched as the individual continues to revise parent- and self-representations during the life cycle. If the God representation is not revised to keep pace with changes in self representation, it soon becomes asynchronous and is experienced as

[5] John McDargh, 'Creating a New Research Paradigm: Ana-Maria Rizzuto', in *Religion, Society and Psychoanalysis*, pp. 181-199.

> ridiculous or irrelevant or, on the contrary, threatening or dangerous.[6]

McDargh points out that there are three ways in which Rizzuto goes beyond Freud here: a) the 'raw material' for these psychic representations is not simply drawn from the male child's biological father; b) the representations of God are not static, but can (note *can*) develop through life; c) these representations can play an adaptive and positive role in the process of developing and maintaining a sense of being a self-in-relation.

'3. It is important to distinguish the more preconscious, imaginal, primary process dimensions of an individual's "God" from the more public, secondary process, conceptual elaborations of "God".'

Rizzuto puts it like this:

> When dealing with the concrete fact of belief, it is important to clarify the conceptual and emotional differences between the concept of God and the images of God which, combined in multiple forms, produce the prevailing God representation in a given individual at a given time. The concept of God is fabricated mostly at the level of secondary-process thinking. This is the God of the theologians, the God whose existence or non-existence is debated by metaphysical reasoning. But this God leaves us cold. This God is only the result of rigorous thinking about causality and philosophical premises. Even someone who believes intellectually that there must be a God may feel no inclination to accept him unless images of previous interpersonal experience have fleshed out a concept with multiple images that can now coalesce in a representation that he can accept emotionally.[7]

Similarly, Winnicott points to our ability to operate in transitional space, and suggests that this ability supports much (perhaps all?) of what is distinctively human in us:

[6] Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 200.
[7] Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God*, pp. 47-48.

> The infusion of meaning from the inner world into actions and objects in the public sphere, or the expression of inner-generated truths by means of external physical and verbal forms, describes not only children playing with teddy bears and empty boxes but also the creation of symphonies, sculptures, novels, and even scientific theories.[8]

Rizzuto takes us a step further, and shows us how our God-representations can be seen as operating in transitional space, and so are themselves open to development (or the absence of it). In turn, our God-representations have an effect on how we represent others, and ourselves, to ourselves, and thus have a profound effect on how we live our lives. I would add that there are other representations significant to our living as religious people that can also be included here, alongside our God-representations themselves. As religious individuals, we live in relation to a rich variety of religious symbols, each with a significance, great or small, for how we represent God, others and ourselves, and thus for how we live our lives.

Ignatius and Imaginative Prayer

Let me return to the *Spiritual Exercises* before drawing all this together. How might depth psychology help us understand what takes place in Ignatian imaginative prayer? Typical of the tradition which Ignatius inherited is this paragraph from Aelred of Rievaulx:

> First enter the room of blessed Mary and with her read the books which prophesy the virginal birth and the coming of Christ. . . . Next, with all your devotion accompany the Mother as she makes her way to Bethlehem. Take shelter in the inn with her, be present and help her as she gives birth . . . [9]

Ignatius has a distinctively different approach. First, he simply gives directions concerning what to pray about, rather than writing a meditation to read and reflect on: the imagination of the individual is left free. Secondly, Ignatius requires the one making the Exercises to

[8] Jones, 'Playing and Believing', p. 114.
[9] Aelred of Rievaulx, 'Rule of Life for a Recluse', nn. 29, 30, in *Treatises and Pastoral Prayer* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971), pp. 80-81.

reflect on the experience of praying with each gospel passage: he asks me to do what he did, and note my reactions. (He does not ask me to *react* as he did—this is not a programmed experience with programmed outcomes.)

What might a psychologist see as happening here? First of all, Ignatius is confronting the one making the Exercises (or the one praying in the spirit of the Exercises) with the fundamental images and symbols of the gospel. (Jung makes the point that the symbols of Christianity take up all the key themes of human living, so that in confronting all these symbols I am confronting all that I need to foster my growth as a human being). But let me repeat what I have already said, in slightly different form: Ignatius would have me recognise, not the general truths of our common belief, but the particular truths of how God engages with me. In other words, Ignatius would have me put myself in the presence of these archetypal Christian *symbols* of life, not in the presence of credal or even of pious formulas that seek to articulate one possible account of their content. In Rizzuto's terms, he wants me to encounter my God-representations, not my God-concepts.

Ignatius' interest is not in general truths, but in how God engages with me personally

This might sound static: 'Here is what is given and fixed: face it and go on your way according to what you have been given.' But Ann Ulanov, an American writer on prayer, says this about archetypal symbols:

> The real thing is not a mental concept but a living presence to which we must work out relationship. This we do by putting together live bits from our personal biography, from images in our culture, and from the archetypal images that emerge from the unconscious. The archetype confers a readiness to respond, not a set content. . . .
>
> Archetypal images, it must be stressed again, are just not set contents of new coercive forces in our lives. On the contrary, archetypal images and our efforts to relate to them—which also may mean changing them according to idiosyncratic conditions of personality and epoch—offer antidotes to . . . stereotypes . . . [10]

[10] Ann Belford Ulanov, 'The Objectivity of Subjectivity', in *Jung and Christianity in Dialogue*, edited by Robert L. Moore and Daniel J. Meckel (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 144-145.

Thus, just as Jung sees me in dialogue with archetypal images, so Ulanov makes the point that such a dialogue can affect not only myself but also the images and symbols with which I am in dialogue. A living symbol is, very precisely, the opposite of a fixed stereotype. (In the same way, a living tradition such as a religion is, very precisely, the opposite of a fixed set of customs—whether of belief or behaviour.)

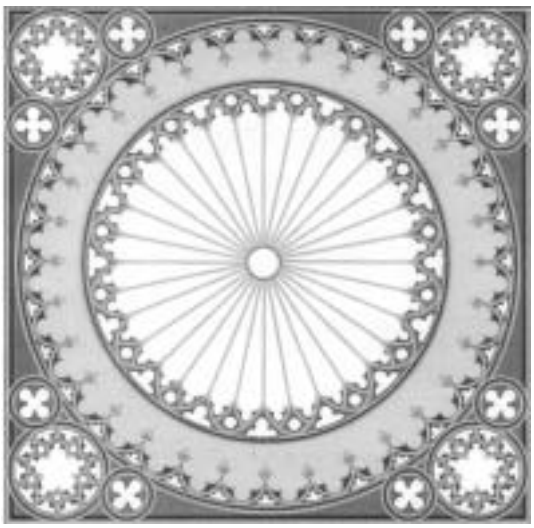
Encountering the central symbols around which I order my life changes me: it cannot do otherwise. In the Exercises Ignatius puts me regularly in contact with the key symbols of my living: should we be surprised if I am transformed by this repeated experience? But the symbols are symbols: should we therefore be surprised if they too are transformed in this dialogue?

> If the God representation is not revised to keep pace with changes in self-representation, it soon becomes asynchronous and is experienced as ridiculous or irrelevant or, on the contrary, threatening or dangerous.[11]

In other words, it is not just that the experience of the Exercises provides a regular 'reality check' for me, as I come face to face yet again with these guiding images and symbols of the Christian community to which I belong. It is also, rather, the case that regular engagement in the Exercises permits these symbols—inevitably shaped individually by my unconscious—to be reshaped in ways that reflect my growth and development. To the degree to which we can understand our representation of God as itself influenced by and largely fashioned from such archetypal symbols, this potential for them to change is crucial.

I am suggesting, then, that in the Exercises Ignatius provides a mechanism enabling the revision of my God-representation—note that neither Rizzuto nor I are talking about the cognitive conceptualisation of God, but the symbolic representation of God, 'the living God' of the title of her book. In so doing, Ignatius helps me continuously to 'upgrade' my faith—my lived relationship with God and others. He also assists me in the process of disengaging from a possessive, idolatrous attachment to any particular image of God, or to any particular image of myself in relation to God. Theological study and

[11] Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God*, p. 200.



reflection can help us see that this or that concept of God, this or that doctrinal formulation, cannot be more than a concept or formulation; we can recognise with Abraham Heschel that there are levels of our religious experience where all formulations and articulations disappear as understatements. Similarly in prayer—including the prayer fostered by the Exercises—we can come to see also that our symbols and representations of God are, and can only be, other-than-God.

Growth and Life-Stories

I have therefore been naming two tasks which Ignatius sets us: that of recognising how and where God has been active in my life, and that of engaging in imaginative gospel-based prayer. But it would be misleading to see them as two distinct tasks. As I engage in that process of 'taking possession of [myself], telling, retelling and reflecting on the history of God's dealings with [me]', I am inevitably reshaping my image of God. As any experienced director will know, the inability to allow my image of God to find a new shape can be an near-insuperable obstacle to growth.[12] One aspect of the 'darkness' that is a

[12] That the image that needs to be reshaped might itself be a terrifying one is the possible start of another discussion.

consistent experience of those faithful to prayer consists in the struggle and the pain that comes from letting go of our old and insufficient God-representations. A wise psychoanalyst speaks in terms of the loss of our old God being experienced as a desertion, however nagging or infantilising such a God may have been. Such attentions were all we knew, and we took them for love. Recognising them in their true colours leaves us pained, rageful and alone.

The second task—that of engaging in imaginative gospel-based prayer in the way Ignatius would have me do it, with the essential element of reflection on my own interior responses—is inseparable from the knowing of self-in-relation-to-God. As I become more sensitive to how I respond to these central symbols, to my movements of attraction and repulsion, consolation and desolation, so I inevitably deepen and refashion my awareness of myself *sub specie aeternitatis*. As I become more aware of and engaged with the key symbols of my faith-life, so I become more aware of the key metaphors by which I live, and from which I derive the meaning of my life. Two US American writers on therapy put it like this:

> A large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives. Self-understanding requires unending negotiation and renegotiation of the meaning of your experience to yourself. In therapy, for example, much of self-understanding involves consciously recognising previously unconscious metaphors and how we live by them. It involves the constant construction of new coherences in your life, coherences which give new meaning to old experiences. The process of self-understanding is the continual development of new life-stories for yourself.[13]

What Ignatius does in the Exercises, it seems to me, is to enable me to recognise and tell myself ever-new stories of the ways in which my life is caught up in God's love. It is important here to acknowledge what may be obvious, namely that if I am genuinely growing before God, then such stories, as they develop one from another and maybe supplant one another, are not fictions but ever-closer approximations to the truth of who I am.

[13] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 233.

Only God knows the whole of that truth. If I may borrow a concept from Winnicott and apply it in a way of which he would probably approve: it is when I see myself mirrored in God's loving gaze that I will know myself fully for the first time. But as I grow in my living towards that moment of death-and-life, I can grow in seeing God and myself more truthfully. The Spiritual Exercises, and the ways of prayer they enable, are one way in which that growth can be fostered. That psychology provides a glimpse of some of the mechanisms which make the Exercises effective in fostering our growth before God seems to me to be good news for spiritual directors and psychologists alike, as for all those who share in the common task spelt out by the Jesuit General, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, in 1995:

> . . . to help men and women disengage themselves from the tarnished and confused image that they have of themselves in order to discover that they are, in God's light, completely like Christ. (quoted in GC 34, d. 2, n. 6).

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