

Interview with Jack Kennedy, Ignatian Spiritual Director

Interviewer: Richard Groves

WEEK ONE: IMPORTANT THEMES & PRINCIPLES FOR DISCERNMENT

JACK: Traditionally, the Thirty Day Retreat began with what were called “Preparation Days.” It was a chance to look at the big picture. So, for example, in the first week Ignatius starts by talking about, in the language of his day, sin. Today I would use the term, ‘disorder’... the disorder of our affections when the things we seek are not my deepest (and also God’s deepest values for me). In the “preparation days” Ignatius began by reminding people that they were loved by God. So, all of the consideration were about how I am loved. Whatever that means, how I matter absolutely and I absolutely matter, all of that. He would say this is a kind of softening of the ground with the Truth. By the way, I realize that in your 30 Day Retreat there will be retreatants from all different spiritual backgrounds so I hope they can translate my ‘God’ language into the vocabulary that works best for them.

RICHARD: So how can we best introduce these important themes when we are beginning our first webinar with Week One material?

JACK: Actually, the way I look at it, which honors your question, is that you make it part of the first week instead of saying “preparation days.” Although, you could also say that these themes will be woven into the entire retreat experience. I think your approach, especially because it’s going to be virtual, is a solid approach.

The movement of the first week in the old language is called the ‘purgative’ movement. I don’t like that language, but it is really asking about what are the un-freedoms in my life that get in the way of me just freely being a soulful, life giving, loving person. And it’s not like I get rid of them, but I want to name them and not let them have power over me. So, it’s also like an invitation to look at un-freedom on the entire globe in terms of the cultural dynamics of how our society leaves us un-free even to pursue the things we most desire.

RICHARD: Can you say more about the freedom and unfreedom themes that seem to be at the heart of the Thirty Day Retreat?

JACK: Essentially Ignatian spirituality is about the movement from un-freedom to freedom. But I would add here in the beginning that the fruit of noticing when you’ve come to freedom is that you are also in a state of gratitude. You’re grateful for having looked at your un-freedom because you don’t look at it alone, you look at it from God’s point of view, which is a place of total love and acceptance. So imagine then, that you’re also free from ‘having’ to get rid of it. You might even say you’re powerless over it, but you are not helpless. You can make choices to be loving, and that leads to a sense of well-being and gratitude. So, it’s good to be clear that the point of this retreat, if we could say such a thing, is for them to know that we are headed towards the freedom of just being open and grateful for the way things are for us—without the need to change a thing.

RICHARD: This all sounds very parallel to AA language.

JACK: It actually is. Another form of psychological language for this is learning to, without judging it, differentiate how the false self covers up the true self. Also, how you get the unconscious into the conscious, so it goes from automatic to intentional. And then discernment is about sorting out which of those automatics are actually healthy habits, and which of the automatics are not allowing me to be who God wants me to be. So, I want to get those more in my consciousness so I can look at them with God, with love and forgiveness, and maybe being more intentional about how I choose not to behave that way anymore.

RICHARD: I remember you teaching us that the Exercises could be summed up with one three-word Latin phrase...

Yes. For Ignatius, the whole movement of the Exercises could be summed up in the words: *Id, Quod Volo*. "That which (*volo*) I decide," and "That which I will." That word can mean both. So it's about aligning, sorting out my desires in order to align them with the choices that are most life giving. That's transformation. And that's what this whole thing's about, inviting you to look at your life and experiences without judgment and shame and guilt, or if you've got shame and guilt, let God's gaze on your shame and guilt lead you to realize that you have shame and guilt but can also hear God say, "Well, I see, I love you anyway and you don't have to get rid of your shame and guilt for me to love you."

RICHARD: It seems there is not an individual who would not benefit from that perspective. Years ago at one of our Spiritual Director training programs I remember you emphasizing a distinction between our strongest desire and the deepest desire. Now is that something that goes along with that first week's theme of freedom?

JACK: Sure it does. But there is another subtle distinction that people often miss. Often times, our strong desire can be manifestation of the deep desire. What you just need to know is, where's the strong desire coming from, that's that question. And, often times strong desires, the loud ones, block out the deeper, quieter ones. That quiet whisper inside. So, taking enough space to listen to what's underneath, for example, I'm going to make this one up... I get angry. I got anger. But the sacred question is: 1) Can I be with my anger without judging it, its energy that says there's something wrong with this picture and I'm angry. It's energy for change. Although I can't change you, I can change me. But is my anger also masking something else deeper. I'm angry because I'm feeling threatened, and I'm feeling threatened because I'm feeling fearful. And I'm fearful because I'm so tender. But can you get to that tenderness, that's almost always what the first week is about. That's where you're grateful that you're loved and seen for the tender person you are, and you don't have to pretend or hide, even from yourself. Does that make sense to you at all?

RICHARD: It sure does. So, I can also start to see where the retreat will take us in terms of the art of discernment... where being free and living more freely will necessarily connect to other Ignatian teaching that distinguishes between consolation and desolation.

JACK: It does. Actually, that's more of a focus in the second week. And that's where, even in the exercises, the whole topic of discernment is introduced. But, if you'll notice, and this is where it gets a little complex, there are guidelines for discernment in the first week and there are guidelines for discernment in the second week and they're different. Because one is, "What do you do when you're going from un-freedom to freedom?" and "How do you discern when you're going from freedom to freedom?" Because you're not going from bad to good, or less to more, it's all good; God just wants to use all of your experience which can lead to the good.

RICHARD: OK To shift gears for a moment, could you say something about how some of the Ignatian teachers say that the thirty day retreat was really specifically about when you were at a major crossroads around a life choice. But I am reading others who say this can be a valid, general support for your entire spiritual life. In other words, you don't have to be in the midst of major life crisis to benefit from learning the skills.

JACK: So, my reflection on that is to go with what I am currently experiencing. I need to hear where each person is at. Some people may be coming up against a major decision and they don't know what to do. And they hear there's a way of discerning so they come to see me hoping to hear my advice. But they don't have any tools for discernment. They have no practice about how to listen to a discerning heart. So, sometimes discernment won't work because before they make a decision it's going to take a lot of prerequisite work to create a space for soulful decision making.

A prerequisite for discernment is indifference, and indifference doesn't mean I don't care, but it means I am open to going in the direct opposite of the direction I really want to go. And, so, I have to be open. And so, this tradition can work but it will take time to explore a person's spiritual language prior to making a major life decision.

RICHARD: Could you say more about those prerequisite conditions for healthy discernment...

JACK: As I said, it takes a state of the heart that is predisposed to the discernment not only when a major decision is involved but really in terms of any important decision. By prerequisite I mean the time and willingness to discern what are called "interior movements" in Ignatian language. Which ones do I ultimately trust? For example, do I trust this guilt I'm feeling? Before I make a final decision can I listen to what the guilt is telling me or is the guilt in this case the "predator?" That's what I mean by sorting out my interior movements. If I'm someone who's grown up with being shamed all my life, discerning where the shame comes from, what does it do to me, and can I be liberated from it a little bit, so I'm not always shame-based, can change my behavior even if it does not change the decision I make in my life.

RICHARD:
Could you say even more about this concept of 'interior movements' prior to discernment and decision making...

JACK: So I would normally introduce the language of interior movements to someone discerning a major decision. I would say that we should not so much be interested yet in their conclusion at this point but take time to explore issues surrounding consolation and desolation. Another term for this is “consonance” and “dissonance,” or, they might relate to the classic terms of “movement” and “counter movement.” All of this needs to be based on what they are experiencing which places the burden on the spiritual director to listen beneath what is at first being presented.

RICHARD: Could you give a practical example...

JACK: I guess the one place that comes to mind is when people will come for spiritual direction regarding what to do about a marriage. Often the reality is that they have already made their mind up about leaving this marriage or, about leaving this job or whatever the case might be. So, in that case, using this tradition I would be trying to consider what it would be like to temporarily back off from the conclusion of their decision so we might consider the advantages of holy indifference in discerning a major life decision...

So I might say, “It sounds to me like you’ve already made your decision, and it seems like it’s clear to you, and you’re looking for outside affirmation from me. And I want to know if/does that resonate with you?” In other words, I need to know if you have already made your own discernment conclusion or whether you are really open to discerning that issue more deeply. If you’ve already come to a decision, there’s nothing to discern, unless you’re questioning your decision and you’re willing to go back and reevaluate your decision. I would be willing to journey with you to so see if you really made it in the context of your own values in life, or your own spirituality, or are you in alignment with God’s desire for you. If that’s the case, then we can continue to work together. What is important here is that I am not questioning their decision but want to know how/if this discernment tradition is a fit for them. But for starts, I need them to honestly admit whether they’ve made a final decision or not.

Now all of this means you as director have to trust how you’re reading the situation. And that’s where the director has to trust their own experiences, and say, “I have to check this out with you.”

RICHARD: And how would you do that?

JACK: I would just ask them. I’d say that I just want clarification so we are not mislead--- meaning that I may be using one set of presumptions when really this is where you’re at. So I always want to start with where you’re at. Important questions might include: What is it that moved you to come here? What is it you’re looking for? What do you really want? That’s an important sacred question.

On the other hand, it would be important to ask, “I don’t think you’re wanting help discerning a decision because I think you’ve made it. So tell me how I can best support you now... perhaps there’s something more, or different, that you are also desiring in life at this time. “Can we start there?” I’m basically asking them to help me understand what’s happening beneath the surface of this particular decision.