

# Leading From Within

## The Ignatian Practice of Deep Listening

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By EDWARD McCORMACK, Ph.D.

**F**or four centuries, “deep listening” has been a powerful resource for Jesuit leaders, and it has much to offer leaders in Catholic health care today. This article describes the practice of deep listening informed by St. Ignatius of Loyola’s examen prayer, its benefit for leaders and how to practice it.

Should leaders in Catholic health care be concerned about spirituality? The relationship between leadership and spirituality was a major topic at the 2010 Catholic Health Initiatives’ (CHI) Leadership Conference in Denver. At a series of presentations alternated between topics related to leadership and reflections on spirituality. Keynote speaker Sr. Hannah O’Donoghue, CCVI, drew connections using the metaphors “leading from within” and “leading out of a full cup.” According to Sr. O’Donoghue, leading from within means tapping into the deeper sources of

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energy and insight within us. Leading out of a full cup means discovering and staying in touch with the sources of meaning in our lives. She encouraged health care leaders to develop concrete spiritual practices that tap into deeper sources of energy and meaning.

Deep listening is one such practice. Deep listening is prayerfully reflecting upon the events of the preceding day. It involves taking a break to listen and discover those deeper, unfamiliar but powerful parts of ourselves that influence how

we interact with others and make decisions. It is the practice of paying attention to ourselves and our relationships and listening for God’s presence in our lives so that we respond to that presence throughout our day.

### DEEP LISTENING IN THE IGNATIAN TRADITION

My discussion of the practice of deep listening is inspired by the examen prayer developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus. Ignatius was the youngest member of the proud and powerful Loyola clan from the Basque region of northern Spain. At the age of 30, while recovering from a leg wound suffered defending a castle in Pamplona, he experienced God calling him to leave his life in the courts of Spain and become a poor pilgrim in the service of God. Ignatius abandoned his connections to the Spanish monarchy along with the wealth, security and reputation associated with the Loyola family name and set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Along the way, he stopped by the town of Manresa, just outside of Barcelona, where he underwent a series of mystical illuminations that transformed his life.

Two of these experiences forever shaped Ignatius’ understanding and approach to the Christian life. He described himself experiencing the Trinity dwelling in all creatures and creating all things from moment to moment. At another time, he

wrote that he had experienced Christ laboring in all people and all creatures to rescue them from sin and to create the world anew.

Through these experiences, Ignatius said, Christ invited him to be his companion and to cooperate with his worldwide mission of healing and renewal. Out of these experiences, Ignatius produced his most famous book, the *Spiritual Exercises*, which is a manual for those who guide a person through a retreat known by the same name. These exercises offer people an intense personal experience of God's love in Christ.

After his pilgrimage, Ignatius studied at the University of Paris where he began to offer people his spiritual exercises. He gathered companions who shared his desire to serve Christ, and the

group eventually became known as the Society of Jesus.

The examen prayer found in the *Spiritual Exercises* is a prayer practice that helps Jesuits achieve their mission of serving Christ in the world. It enables them to stay in touch with the Spirit of God and serve Christ throughout their day. Ignatius wanted Jesuits to be men of gratitude who understood that all the good they have comes from their abundantly generous Creator and Lord. The examen puts this belief into practice on a daily basis.

Called to live as companions of Jesus and collaborate with God's work in the world, Jesuits must remain attuned to Christ's presence throughout the day if they are to serve him. The examen



## THE PRACTICE OF DEEP LISTENING

The practice of deep listening can be a powerful way to start or end your day. It contains the following steps:

1. Transition into prayer
2. Gratitude
3. Review
4. Renewal
5. Transition out of the prayer

The transition into prayer begins when you find a place to sit and quiet down. Notice your breathing. As you notice your breath, listen to your body. Are you rested, tired, stiff or hungry? Notice how you feel about sitting down and trying to slow down. Do you enjoy it or are you restless? Continue to pay attention to your breath, because it will calm you down and help you listen more deeply.

After quieting down, consider that you are in the presence of God who looks on you with great affection. Now recall the events of the past 24 hours. Allow the Spirit to help you recognize and remember the many gifts you received during that time. What kinds of gifts? Being alive another day is a gift. So are all the good things in life, much of what we take for granted, such as a hot shower, ready access to good food and a safe place to live. Family, friends, children, your career and your colleagues are gifts.

Christian tradition teaches us that God is the source of all the good in our lives. Thank God for all you have received during the previous day. Through these gifts, God is caring for you. At this point you have begun to

**Do not make any judgments, but just be aware of what you were experiencing at different times during the day.**

listen to your life with the ears of faith. It will enable you to hear the presence of God the Creator in your life.

This practice helps us overcome the tendency to take so much in our lives for granted. It cultivates in us an appreciation for family, friends and colleagues.



It is a source of joy that moves us to be as generous to others as God has been to us.

The next step is to review the previous day and listen to those deeper parts of yourself. Once again recall the events of the previous 24 hours, but this time notice what mood you were in during the morning, at noon time, in the evening. Did your mood change? What

were the strong images, feelings and thoughts that affected how you interacted with others? Were there times when you were anxious,

excited, focused on your work, at peace, worried or deeply moved? Did you feel frustrated? Did you feel resistance to what you were asked to do?

Do not make any judgments, but just be aware of what you were experiencing at different times during the day. Ask

the Spirit of God to show you where God was in the midst of those thoughts and feelings.

The Christian tradition teaches us that our fundamental vocation is to serve Christ. As you reflect on the previous day, when did you cooperate with Christ (or with the values rooted in the Gospel)? When did you not cooperate with him? Recall those situations in which you were trying to cooperate with Christ. Were there moments you felt filled with energy, courage, inspiration and insight? Did you have a sense of peace, meaning and joy as you went about your day? If so, those were moments when God was encouraging you. Listen for those moments.

Also notice when you felt discouraged, restless, filled with doubts and thoughts that turned you away from doing the good. You are getting in touch with those forces that seek to prevent you from cooperating with Christ. As you reflect on your day, were there situations in which you did not cooperate with God? Later did you feel some remorse or perhaps a sense of concern for those you hurt? This too is an experience of God. If this was the case, ask God for forgiveness.

Now that you are more aware of the gifts you have been given and the deeper movements within you, it is time to reflect on the coming day. Each of us has a to-do list. Ask the Spirit of God to help you listen to what good God wants you to do tomorrow, and how God wants you to do it. You are seeking to know which initiatives God desires you to choose and to put into practice. This practice enables you to enter into various interactions responding to the desire of Christ rather than reacting to and being carried away by the dynamics of the situation.

One way of concluding your practice of deep listening is by saying the Lord's Prayer. Another is by promising to be attentive to the Spirit of God in the coming day and to cooperate with that Spirit at all times.

helps Jesuits to be aware of how Christ influences their thoughts, desires and decisions, and to gain awareness of whether or not they cooperated with Christ that day. It is also a very practical prayer that seeks to orient the Jesuit towards the good desires and good works Christ has in store for him in the day to come.

Although Ignatius clearly targeted his spiritual writings to Catholics, a person does not have to be a Christian to incorporate the practice of deep listening. The practice directs us to listen to the best in ourselves. As we try to quiet down, we will become attentive to our bodies and feel whether we are tired, sleepy or rested. We will learn to pay attention to our moods and identify our desires — the superficial, the disordered and those that are life-giving. This kind of listening takes time and patience, because the deeper feelings and thoughts that influence how we act do not readily reveal themselves to us, especially if we are new to this practice.

Next, we must reflect on what happened to us during the past 24 hours by recalling in gratitude some of the good we have been given during that time. Deep listening invites us to see our life, our spouse, children, friends, coworkers and staff as gifts. There are deeper dimensions to life that Ignatius asks us to pay attention to through this practice. As we notice the desires and thoughts that influenced our decisions and actions of the preceding day, we can become aware of how the Spirit of God influenced those desires, thoughts, decisions and actions. How did we respond to

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God? Did we cooperate with God, or did we resist, ignore or work against God?

Finally, we are directed to consider the day ahead. Everyone has a long to-do list, but what is the good God wants us to do today, and how does God want us to accomplish this?

#### **LISTENING INFORMS ACTIONS**

Health care leaders who practice deep listening informed by the examen prayer will find themselves leading in new ways. The busy life of a

leader makes it difficult to pause, quiet down and listen. Nevertheless, the person who practices deep listening according to the Ignatian tradition will discover what it means to lead from a full cup by introducing a contemplative moment into

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each day, a habit that can be transformative. This transformation begins with self-knowledge. Deep listening makes a person more aware of moods, needs and motives as he or she goes about the day, improves the ability to anticipate situations and gives greater insight into what influences interactions and decisions. Over a period of time, the practitioner will learn about the various ways he or she reacts to different situations and thus be better able to respond rather than react to situations.

Deep listening trains a person to lead out of a spirit of gratitude. A person becomes a leader because of skills, experience and expertise acquired through formative work experiences, a strong educational history and a great deal of support, guidance and mentoring. Leaders who realize there is much to be grateful for will find a life increasingly filled with joy. They will deepen their appreciation for the people who work for them, from the chief surgeon to the housekeeping staff. They will develop a great respect for the financial and technological resources used by the health care facility. All these people and resources will be viewed as gifts from God, given for the mission of the hospital. Such leaders will care for and cultivate these resources in service of the mission. Furthermore, grateful leaders will become as generous to others as others have been to them.

The practice of deep listening offers a leader in Catholic health care one way to stay in touch with the healing mission of Christ. Reflecting back on the past 24 hours, how well has he or she cooperated with God to fulfill the mission of Catholic health care? Have motivations and decisions

been influenced by the Spirit of God or by forces opposed to the mission?

This kind of reflection entails becoming attuned to the deeper dimensions of life by learning to recognize the Holy Spirit's influence in one's day. It can take many forms. It may come in the form of energy for the mission, insight, inspiration, or clarity about a decision one has to make. It can come as peace, or quiet confidence. It may be more spiritual in nature, such as a sense of God's call or presence coming from within or through another.

Deep listening informed by the examen prayer will challenge the leader to consider the ways in which decisions and actions can be contrary to the healing mission of Catholic health care. That is a difficult part of this practice, but it is vital to leadership in Catholic health care. There are many possible attitudes, assumptions, blind spots and habits that can undermine a leader's ability to faithfully carry out the healing mission of Christ. Deep listening done in the tradition of the examen calls leaders to face up to the ways in which ego, pride, selfishness, insecurity and need to control can distort relationships and undermine decisions that are best for the organization. To recognize these uncomfortable realities is a matter of noticing one's motivations, and, as a person in power, how one treats others. Everyone who faces up to these realities needs to experience the forgiveness and mercy of God. For those that do, they find freedom to lead in ways they could not have anticipated.

A good leader plans his or her approach to the tasks of the day. Both short-term and long-term planning can be enhanced by a strong sense of gratitude, an awareness of the mission of Catholic health care and perhaps an experience of the Spirit of God. Deep listening offers the leader a chance to consider on a daily basis, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, what dimension of the mission needs attention today.

The practice of deep listening fosters the ability to listen to others, developed as one learns to listen to oneself and discovers how important it is to be heard. Deep listening trains a leader to know when to listen, when to speak, what to say to others and how to say it. The leader will pay attention to body language and voice tone, listen to the other person's story, ideas, hopes and struggles.

Listening is a powerful sign of respect and it

builds relationships of trust and cooperation. It is the only way leaders can come to know those who work with them and for them.

### LISTENING INFORMS QUESTIONS

Deep listening is a way to assess a department or organization using these questions:

- What are the resources available to achieve our mission?
- Do we act as good stewards of these resources, or do we take them for granted; or worse, squander some of them?
- How well are we fulfilling the healing mission of Christ?
- What motivates us?
- What makes the work meaningful at all levels?
- Do we measure success solely in financial terms, or do we also take into account responsible use of resources, the delivery of excellent health care and how well all people are treated with respect, dignity and compassion?
- What works well in our organization and what are the obstacles to achieving our mission?
- What needs to change so we can better fulfill our mission?
- How has the Spirit of God been at work in our institution?
- What forces are opposed to that Spirit?
- What is the Spirit of God calling us to undertake as an organization?

We have been discussing what it means to lead from within and to lead from a full cup. The practice of deep listening guided by the Ignatian examen fleshes out what this means for leaders in Catholic health care. It offers the possibility of growing in self-knowledge, being grateful and being attentive to when and where we are cooperating with the Spirit of God and the mission of Catholic health care. This practice can replenish a person's "cup," making him and her powerful and productive leaders.

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