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This approach to God through love and longing is in marked contrast to the Buddhist tradition, which frequently influences many of us and our directees. According to Buddhism's four noble truths, the cause of all human suffering is desire and attachment. Buddhist meditators actually "vow to extinguish desire." The Buddhists suggest that it is our very attachment to our wants, our willing, and our cravings that creates suffering. Thus, major spiritual traditions offer two radically different approaches—one through desire and one through extinguishing desire.

Why do Buddhists reject desire? One reason is that wanting and desiring tend to propel us into the future. It can easily take us out of the present, where God or Ultimate Reality is (and where we are too) into possibly illusory, unrealizable fantasy. ~~There is some element of desire that can never be satisfied.~~ That frustration leads some into an addictive form of craving that enslaves—the cause of suffering according to the Buddha. For others, the immediate frustration develops into a form of hope rather than craving. The Buddha's teaching from another point of view is actually quite similar to the Christian mystic. The Buddha recognized a distorted, illusory quality to desire and taught his disciples simply to bracket or ignore them. In that process, absolute reality became available. Christian mystics of the affective type recommend intensifying desire to the point of transparency. Both approaches take the meditator or pray-er beyond conventional and superficial wants.

Discovering What We Really Want

I am convinced that many Christians never entertain their desires long enough to know what they really want. If we habitually suppress our wants, we may never discover their true core of our longing that could lead us more deeply into God. ~~It takes~~

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courage to allow our desires to become conscious. When they do, we become responsible for either participating in their fulfillment—moving toward that which we desire—or participating in their frustration—failing to act on our desire.

Many of us have been conditioned to expect our desires to be frustrated anyway. We are sure we are never going to get what we want. There are a lot of "spoil-ers" in Christian tradition. ~~There exists a very strong misperception that what we really want will surely be at odds with God's will.~~ Our wills are usually equated with willfulness. God's will, God's yearning, God's wanting will always contradict ours. This perception may be true in the early stages of the conversion process when our wills are not aligned with God's. Beyond the beginnings, however, our wills tend to coincide with God's.

Perhaps we have interpreted God's will as something akin to the will of authorities, mostly those who have impressed us with the fact that only their wishes counted. In order to survive we may have had to put our own desires aside in order to satisfy theirs. Some people have an even more troubling history of parental or educational discipline in which, as children, their will was broken through punishment inflicted by an authority. This disciplining into submission was often presented to the child as God's will. Directors need to be aware of the effects of such negative experiences ascribed to God's will and gently bring them to the surface in order to open a new possibility for the directee.

The following exercise might be helpful for your reflection:

When was the last time you asked yourself what you really want? And how long did you allow yourself to entertain that longing? Thirty seconds? A couple of minutes? What inner or outer voices suggested that whatever it was, you ought not be so foolish as to think it could be satisfied? At some point, did you judge yourself to be willful or selfish?

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Those who have transmitted Christian tradition often neglected the deeper dimensions of the reality of God's yearning and ours beyond the beginnings of spiritual development. Once we awaken to God's love and respond, there is usually a deep stream of mutual desiring going on—a responsive yearning and desiring that is, in fact, one with God's yearning. Once we or our directees go through spiritual awakening, our wills and God's will tend to come together into one yearning, such as Mechtild describes. Increasing intimacy with God actually heals our disordered and misplaced willfulness, gradually transforming it into willingness...openness...spaciousness. The recognition of this process marks the beginning of discovering the convergence of divine and human love that is the actual ground of all our yearnings.

If we mistakenly assume we can't ever have our desires satisfied, then we're pretty close to extinguishing them. We have never discovered where they lead or what might really make us happy. Instead, we attempt to satisfy ourselves. We bury our inchoate, unformed, barely perceptible longings for intimacy with God by settling for whatever forms of consumer goods or relationships are immediately available or convenient. Too often we assuage our wanting with something that can never satisfy the depth of our longings. The interaction we truly desire takes place on a totally different plane; no thing, no human relationship can bear the weight of our longing for God.

North American culture constantly bombards us with advertising through the media. The advertising industry is extraordinarily skilled at manipulating our desire through subliminal messages that tell us what we ought to want. They seduce us into thinking we can become secure, safe, and comfortable through consumer goods. The right car, perfume, or deodorant offers happiness or salvation. Lest we think we are uninfluenced by this bombardment, consider that the average person sees or hears a thousand ads per day. A moment's

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reflection can surface the slogans of particular products in a second. We live in a culture that programs our desires toward things rather than toward other values. These artificially created and orchestrated desires direct us away from our own interiority and away from any form of pain or discomfort. It may take some time and sorting out to discover what we want from the inside.

Engaging Our Desires

The Exercises or any other serious interaction with God in prayer that encourages us to entertain and engage our desires is one of the most helpful and growth-enhancing things we can do. It is my experience that such engagement frequently requires the support and encouragement of a spiritual director. It often feels frightening and disconcerting to discover that we don't know what we want or to find that we don't want something badly enough to make the choices it would require. As everything we think we want emerges, it takes some time to test out whether we really do want it or not. This interior sorting through requires listening to ourselves at deeper levels than many of us are accustomed. Consequently, engagement with God and our desires in prayer involves a patient and often lengthy process of tutoring and ordering our desires. This takes place only in and through our concrete interaction with God.

Honest prayer, in fact, structures our desires. It is often true that we may not know what we want and that we may often pray for the wrong things, even "snatching at God as at a brass ring." In allowing our desires room to be—to become conscious, intelligent, and available to us, even to become enlarged and expanded—and in the process of praying we find that we and our desires "get sorted out." By following Ignatius's lead, focusing our desires, and praying for specific

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graces, we often discover more clearly what we don't want and what we do as we continue our dialogue with God.

The book *Primary Speech* by Ann and Barry Ulanov has a wonderful little chapter entitled "Prayer and Desire." As good psychologists, they describe prayer as primary speech—our fantasies, self-talk, conscious and unconscious yearnings. By giving expression to them in the freedom of prayer, if we have come to trust God, we are changed and so too is the shape of our desiring:

Desire leads to more desire. Prayer articulates our longing for a fullness of being, our reaching out of the mind for what is beyond it, and helps us find and love God and grow with our love. It is like the sun warming a seed into life, like the work of clearing away weeds and bringing water to the interior garden of St. Teresa's inspired imagery. Prayer enlarges our desire until it receives God's desire for us. In prayer we grow big enough to house God's desire for us, which is the Holy Spirit.³

Earlier in the same chapter they assert:

...God does not need to be told anything about what we need and want. Our words in prayer are not for God's instruction but our own. We discover this way what in fact we do desire, what we want to reach out to and love. Thus we come to hold in open awareness what before we had lived unknowingly.

Surprises happen. We may discover we want more than we thought we dared. In the secret space of prayer, we may reveal to ourselves how much we want truth, beauty, love. In daily life, we usually hide from such desires, trying to protect ourselves from their urgency with the cynical argument that those are merely childish hopes that life correctly disillusioned. We may discover desires we did not know about or knew only dimly, desires that if followed would take us far off the path we have so carefully constructed. We might have to change jobs, leave relationships, for sake our whole way of living to take up an entirely different one. Following desires does not, as critics might warn, necessarily lead

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to self-indulgence and all the hedonist sensations. Rather, it heads straight into the dangers of moral dilemma. The voice that God hears in prayer gets louder and louder for us if we go on praying. It may come to speak of a truth and a way of life that break sharply with the life we are living.⁴

We have good reason for refusing to entertain our desires. It excuses us from moving toward them. When Ignatius asks us to "pray for what we desire" and then goes on to specify, for example, that we pray "for intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become a human person for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely,"⁵ we often discover that there is some part of this desire that we don't want, at least not yet. If, as the Ulanovs explain, desire leads to conversion of life, we and our directees may manifest considerable resistance to discovering them or praying for certain graces.

Storyteller Megan McKenna captures this reluctance to claim and act on our desires in a wonderful parable:

There was a woman who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart and all sorts of good things, but she was very frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart. She would read the papers and get depressed. One day she decided to go shopping, and she went into a mall and picked a store at random. She walked in and was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. She knew it was Jesus, because he looked just like the pictures she'd seen on holy cards and devotional pictures. She looked again and again at him, and finally she got up her nerve and asked, "Excuse me, are you Jesus?" "I am." "Do you work here?" "No," Jesus said, "I own the store." "Oh, what do you sell in here?" "Oh, just about anything!" "Anything?" "Yeah, anything you want. What do you want?" She said, "I don't know." "Well," Jesus said, "feel free, walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want, and then come back and we'll see what we can do for you."

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She did just that, walked up and down the aisles. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air, careful use of resources. She wrote furiously. By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list. Jesus took the list, skimmed through it, looked up at her and smiled. "No problem." And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, stood up, and laid out the packets. She asked, "What are these?" Jesus replied, "Seed packets. This is a catalog store." She said, "You mean I don't get the finished product?" "No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. You plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them grow and someone else reaps the benefits." "Oh," she said. And she left the store without buying anything.⁶

Like the woman in the parable, we are willing to leave our desire-seeds in the package right in the store. We are unwilling to change or to boldly move toward meeting God in that desire and fulfilling it together. Writer and spiritual director Patrick Carroll suggests, "If I can really discover what I want at the deep level, God wants exactly that. God is not making up stuff for me. God is creating me out of my desire and my moving toward that."⁷

Many of us are not at all sure of what we really want. Yet our desires are present and condition all of our behavior consciously and unconsciously. Since they are there anyway, we might as well let our desires into our prayer and allow them (and in the process, ourselves) to get sorted out. My understanding is that the process is something like this:

If we receive the courage to voice our desires, the dialogue with Jesus or God can influence, correct, or illumine the misunderstood desire. Praying in such a way that we allow ourselves to be affected by God opens us to influence, to discovery, and to change. We keep on expressing our real desires until they are

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fulfilled, until they are changed, or until we are convinced God is responding to us.

The apostle Paul illustrates this process. He tells us, "A thorn was given me in the flesh.... Three times, I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Cor 12:8-9). In the relationship, Paul discovered he did not actually need to be delivered from this particular suffering. Something else was going on that was more important. Whether he prayed three times or fifty times about something, his desire was made known, prayed into, and responded to. What he wanted was modified by God's response. Paul's attitude and self-knowledge changed through this interaction and mutual influence.

Here I am discussing fundamental desires, not something we superficially want that really doesn't matter much, but something more like the directionality of our whole being. These deeper desires are more connected to our authenticity, to the kinds of persons we are becoming under the sway of God's grace. These are the desires that result in vocation, a fundamental calling to express our Christian call to share God's life in and through Christ in some concrete way.

In the context of the Exercises and other forms in Christocentric prayer, the person of Jesus, his life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection play a central role in shaping and clarifying desires. A personal relationship with Jesus tends to take on a life of its own. As unitive and affective prayer deepen, Jesus begins to live in Christians in ways that concretely help them to know and live out their desires. Disciples are constantly contemplating Jesus—who he is, what he values, and how he acts. Gradually, we desire to share that life, those values, and actions more deeply and with greater constancy.

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There are many intermediate stages and meanderings in appropriating the mystery of Christian life and of gradually becoming "Jesus" kinds of persons. We discover our need for healing in a relationship that reveals our inability to respond to another's love. We find ourselves in need of reconciliation, confronted with a form of sinfulness we feel helpless to repair. We find we need an infusion of love because we are so limited in our loving that we cannot love someone we want to or feel we should.

At the same time, we may be afraid of the very thing we want. If we've been ill a long time, we may prefer to be invalids rather than assume responsibility for caring for ourselves. We may not wholeheartedly want healing. We may recognize we need to forgive someone to release ourselves from bitterness or resentment about some injury, but we discover we are still angry, and our anger makes us feel strong. We don't want to let it go. So what do we do?

I find it is helpful (in my personal prayer and as a suggestion for directees) to pray for the desire to forgive or to pray for the desire to let go of the anger. The basic principle is emotional congruence. We uncover and express our honest desires. If we can want to release anger, for instance, we have become open to a possibility in grace that is not yet ours. Eventually, we can choose to release the anger. We can only pray from our actual feelings, coming to prayer from that honest fundamental desire, which leaves us open to an unpredictable outcome. Praying with this kind of emotional congruency gives great freedom. We can pray out of our anger, our weariness, our discouragement, our fear, our loss, our joy, and so on. We express those feelings to their conclusion or until we're tired of them. When we're finished, we wait for a response. Gradually, we discover changes in us. A Gospel pericope discloses a new possibility. God touches us through another. A long walk by the ocean crying or shouting calms us and we are now open to influence.

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This process requires that we and our directees be deeply present to ourselves, to feelings, to the deep places where both the surrender and the withholding are. When we enter into this dialogue, "We discover what in fact we do desire, what we want to reach out and love."

The spiritual direction conversation is a privileged place where the subtle interplay of desire and complex emotional responses can be uncovered and the directee then encouraged to return to prayer with greater understanding, self-knowledge, and self-presence. When we explore with directees or retreatants what they are actually feeling, wanting, and experiencing, we can help them reframe their experience so they can return to pray from the sense of themselves that has emerged in the spiritual direction conversation.

Conditioned Desires

Gerald May gives a wonderful example of how opaque our desires are, even to ourselves. We think we want things that our culture encourages us to want, and sometimes we fail to recognize our deeper desires are already being fulfilled.

I asked a young woman what she most deeply wanted. She responded immediately, "I'd like a happy home and family, security, a sense of being worthwhile." Then I asked her to sit in silence for a moment and try to be open to what desires she could really feel, right in the present moment. After a while she looked up with tears in her eyes. "I don't know what to say. What I actually feel is that things are really okay right now. Better than okay. I don't think I want anything more than what I have at this very moment." I asked her to be still once again, to look more deeply into her present feeling, to seek any desire that might honestly be there. Softly, she said, "It's very hard to put into words. I feel really blessed, and I feel gratitude; I want to say thank you to someone.

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Is it God? If it is, I want to give God a hug and say thanks. And I wish people could feel this way more, could have some peace."¹⁰

May suggests that this woman's first response came from her adjusted, conditioned conception of herself. She first recounts what advertising and culture tell her she is supposed to want. As she became aware of her present-moment feeling, she drew closer to the response of her heart to that reality. Her authentic desire revealed itself to her.¹¹ This is a wonderful example of how the spiritual direction conversation assists us in discovering our authentic desires.

When we consider "conditioned" responses, it is important to realize that religious people can have a set of responses that are conditioned by their religious culture. The desires we are called to pray for can become routinized. In the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, for instance, the retreatant is invited to:

- ask for a growing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins;
- beg for a deep sense of the pain which the lost suffer, that if because of my faults I forget the love of the eternal Lord, at least the fear of falling into sin;
- ask of our Lord the grace not to be deaf to His call, but prompt and diligent to accomplish His most holy will;
- ask for an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love Him more and follow Him more closely;
- ask for knowledge of the deceits of the rebel chief and help to guard myself against them; and also to ask for a knowledge of the true life exemplified in the sovereign and true Commander, and the grace to imitate Him;
- beg for the grace to choose what is more for the glory of His Divine Majesty and the salvation of my soul;

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- beg God our Lord to deign to move my will, and to bring to my mind what I ought to do in this matter that would be more for His praise and glory;
- ask for sorrow, compassion, and shame because the Lord is going to His sufferings for my sins;
- ask for sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of the great affliction Christ endures for me;
- ask for the grace to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord.¹²

These desires can become yet another set of externally generated "oughts" or "shoulds" that we feel we should—but which perhaps we don't really want. A retreatant, for example, thinks she *ought* to really want to suffer more, but she isn't really interested in that. Going through the motions without much heart results in boring prayer. If we or our directees focus prayer through one of these bogus desires, usually not much will happen.

Sometimes, however, the directee develops real resistance to the proposed desire and even content of a meditation. If this resistance goes unrecognized, attempts to pursue the proposed material will result in taking the retreatant further and further away from his or her own present reality and feeling and the way God wishes to reveal God's self. Those directing the Exercises need to explore with directees if the proposed focus is something that they really desire. If it isn't, then directors need to redescribe or reframe both the desire and the material for meditation in ways that will facilitate prayer. Sometimes directees themselves intuitively sense how God is choosing to reveal God's self to them.

Clarification of Feelings and Desires

If we are working with directees in subsequent retreats or in ongoing direction, the clarification of feelings and especially desires is one of the most important things we can pursue. The way Ignatius structures the sequence of desires presupposes that the person so engaged in the Exercises is undergoing a conversion process—one that usually occurs in the early stages of spiritual awakening. This sequence of desires is also expressed in the metaphors typical of masculine consciousness, which is shaped by the hero's journey and begins with heroic ideals and quests and ends in intimacy in the latter stages. Women's process is a little more complex. ~~For many women, life is in the details rather than in the heroic dream.~~ Desire for women is frequently related to intimate relating. Their desires may or may not be particularly heroic in tone. Nevertheless, Ignatius's schema can have the positive effect of enlarging a woman's desire beyond the constraints of conventional femininity—of inviting her to dream a larger reality for herself.

Specification of Desire for Women

It is important to recognize that Ignatius's principle of "asking for what we desire" can be distinguished from the specific desires he enumerates. I have experimented with expanding the range of those desires through some of the themes in the writing of women mystics. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Gertrud, for example, intrigue me as an alternative set of focusing desires that appear to be particularly congruent for women maturing in their intimacy with Christ or God.

Gertrud's exercises are expressed in images drawn from sacramental life and female Benedictine monastic life. In her *Exercises*, Gertrude

- offers an exercise on *rebirth*—the desire to be reborn in God through the holiness of new life and to be restored to a kind of spiritual infancy related to the experience of baptism;
- discusses the desire for *spiritual conversion*, which is related to a core value in Benedictine monasticism. (One is to become God's own "monastery," the dwelling place of love and of all the virtues, literally to house God's love in her being);
- invites her retreatant to the *spiritual marriage*, with exercises awakening love in mutual cherishing;
- recalls her religious profession in the image of *consecration*, her way of following Christ, through the fiercest of desires and prayer;
- explores the idea of *mystical union*, joining oneself to God in affection, devotion, longing, and intention;
- offers exercises in *jubilation*, utter praise of the Divine, anticipating eternity, when she will be satisfied fully by the presence of the Lord;
- concludes with an exercise about *making amends*, confident in the redeeming grace of Jesus.¹³

Contemporary readers may find her language too effusive for their taste, but I like the images whereby she couches these exercises and desires as ways of "enlarging" and making one bolder in desiring. I don't think we pay enough attention to some of her themes, such as *jubilation*. When was the last time you or your directees spent a whole day exulting in joy in sheer praise of God?

Gertrud ends her exercises with *making amends*. Repentance and contrition emerge in the face of God's mercy and cherishing love. Ignatius, on the other hand, begins here. Are these mystics addressing retreatants at different stages of the spiritual life? Or might these be gendered differences? The

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themes of these exercises have a distinctively feminine cast to them and expand the imaginative potential of director and directee for recognizing a broader range of spiritual experience than those named by any single mystical writer.

Patrick Carroll provides a contemporary example highlighting the emergence of a focusing desire ~~from a woman's starting place in retreat.~~ He emphasizes the importance of encouraging retreatants to specify for themselves the general desire with which they make the Exercises. What might the particular grace be for this directee? One retreatant focused her entire retreat on how Jesus loves with a mother's love. For this mother, it meant a quality of loving that enabled one to love other people and at the same time to leave them free, even as they are loved with real passion. This freedom to expand the possible desires beyond Ignatius's list of ten allows room for congruently gendered desires to enter into an Ignatian approach to prayer. Directors need to be able to imagine such capacious and novel images and desires as they emerge in their directees as well as to encourage those who might be stuck in conventional images and desires to move toward their own originality and specificity.

Progression of Desire

Gerald May describes a simple progression that begins with ~~desire moves to intention, and ends with control.~~ He writes: "Desire is wanting something, longing for some satisfaction. Intention is claiming the wanting, consciously owning it, and choosing to seek satisfaction. Control is what we are able to do to make the satisfaction happen."¹⁴ May believes that many need to expand the space between desire and intention, suggesting that ~~for often we leap to control where we may enjoy only limited success.~~ But like the Ulanovs, he urges us to give our desire space, to allow it room to be free and become enlarged.

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This, he suggests, can lead eventually to a whole new way of being and living that stays quite close to God and God's loving, which opens up to us in this process. Claiming our wanting, becoming conscious and choosing it, holds us open to God's desiring and ours becoming one.

The following example from an actual spiritual direction session might make some of these reflections on desire and the process of spiritual direction in relationship to them more concrete.

Susan: I was doing a guided imagery meditation on the retreat for our women. I really wanted something to happen. Maybe when someone else led the meditation, something more would happen. All I felt was this vague consoling sense of presence. It was peaceful, but I felt frustrated afterwards.

Director: (Initiates some exploration of what this was like, especially the vagueness, and what prayer was like when she didn't have any images.)

Susan: It is just kind of peaceful...something of a bare sense of presence.

Director: When prayer is like that, do you usually feel frustrated?

Susan: No, usually not.

Director: What had you been praying with before you went on the retreat?

Susan: Remember, I'd been praying that Jesus would show me his face. You even gave me Ellen's painting of a face of Jesus to be with in prayer.