

Tom Elliott's work offers us a path to wholehearted living, showing us, through the time-tested wisdom of St. Ignatius Loyola, how to live with passion, focus, and conviction. I recommend this book for anyone who wants to dive into the deep of life rather than wading near life's surface, who desires to live wholly rather than fragmentarily, purposefully rather than just getting along. This book is funny, poignant, and profound—the real deal—the kind of book that can really change your life. • **STEPHEN J. BINZ**, *biblical scholar, speaker, and author of Threshold Bible Study*

Drawing on his twenty years of experience as a spiritual director, Tom Elliott has become a valued voice on Ignatian spirituality. His first book, *The Intimacy You Desire*, offers a wonderful overview of the *Spiritual Exercises*, while his second book, *Becoming Wholehearted*, dives into the invitation to wholeness and holiness in the *Exercises*. Elliott offers meaningful examples of this invitation in each chapter. Even those who are already familiar with the *Exercises* will be surprised by the new approach Elliott offers to the meditations in Week Two. • **JAMES MARTIN, SJ**, *author of Learning to Pray and Building a Bridge*

Tom Elliott provides a useful guide to restoring energy and meaning when discouragement tempts us to resign ourselves to a life of dissatisfaction and compromise. Offering practical ways to “reboot” when we feel stuck and weary, his suggestions

are rooted in the classical wisdom of St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, sensitively adapted to the struggles of people today. Replete with rich illustrations from his personal life and work with others, this book reflects Elliott's insightfulness and compassion as a caring pastoral minister. • WILKIE AU, PHD, co-author of *God's Unconditional Love: Healing Our Shame*

Tom invites readers to accompany him into his own real and deep journey into wholeheartedness as they reflect on their own. His great honesty about his own struggles and joys, desolations and consolations will help readers to be courageous, honest, and real with God as they enter into the *Spiritual Exercises*. This book offers many examples of individuals struggling to live a wholehearted life with and in Jesus. Readers will discover that the *Exercises* are about us as well as Jesus Christ; they are about letting Jesus companion with us in our life experiences as well as being Jesus' companion in his life. • MAUREEN CONROY, RSM, DMIN, author of *Looking into the Well and The Discerning Heart*

I used *Becoming Wholehearted* as a guide for my own personal annual retreat, and it led me to deep and fresh experiences of meditations I've been praying with my whole adult life. I can think of no higher praise for a book than to say that it led me closer to Christ, and Tom's book did this for me. • MARK E. THIBODEAUX, SJ, author of *Armchair Mystic*

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INTRODUCTION

Into the Deep

Some people consider me a failure because, sixteen years after ordination, I left the priesthood. To be honest, there are days I wake up agreeing with them. I'm not a person who flippantly makes commitments and then backs out of them. In fact, I've always prided myself on not only finishing a job but also finishing it perfectly. That pursuit of perfection began very early in my life. As a child, I connected being perfect with being loved. By the time I was a teenager, my desire to serve and my need to feel perfect were already directing my life toward seminary. It was only after eight years of seminary and many years of priesthood that I realized being an ordained perfectionist did not lead me to wholehearted living and the joy of passionate service, but rather, to a very dark place where I felt like I was living other people's expectations rather than my heart's most authentic desires.

The dark and oppressive grip of perfectionism began loosening when I learned about Ignatius of Loyola, a sixteenth-century saint from Spain. Despite having lived five hundred years ago, his experiences, meditations, and wisdom have profoundly shaped my life. While many people might

view him as a larger-than-life figure from a time when knights in shining armor rescued damsels in distress, I have come to see Ignatius as a true friend who, through his writing, vulnerably shares his struggles and successes in ways that help me to be more wholehearted. I'm sure you can think of people like that in your life—men and women who became extraordinary mentors, companions, and sources of encouragement for you. Such people are tremendous gifts to us and are necessary guides into the wholeheartedness we desire.

I was introduced to Ignatius when I enrolled in spiritual direction training a few years after ordination. My classmates and I spent three years studying his famous retreat manual, the *Spiritual Exercises*, which Ignatius worked on from 1521 until he died in 1556. I'd love to say that by the time I was certified in spiritual direction I completely understood the *Exercises*, but that would be a lie. In fact, I barely understood the meditations and prayers in the *Exercises* in my head, let alone my heart. It wasn't until a few years after my certification in spiritual direction that my director prayerfully guided me through Ignatius' retreat manual over the course of more than four years. During that time, the wisdom and transformative power of the *Exercises* moved from my head to my heart.

During those four years, the one to two hours I spent every day using Ignatius' *Exercises* in personal prayer were life-changing. I learned for the first time that discerning God's will is rooted in acknowledging our heart's most genuine desires, which is much different from trying to satisfy the perceived expectations of God and others, which is what I was raised to believe. I also learned that Ignatius strongly cautioned anyone who was con-

sidering changing a major decision or vocation. Since by that point I had begun re-discerning my priesthood, I responded to Ignatius' caution by finding a therapist who was willing to join my spiritual director in accompanying me on the journey.

By the time I finished all of the meditations in the retreat manual, I not only experienced an intimacy with God that I could never have fathomed, but I also felt for the first time the freedom to ask some hard questions about my perfectionism and my priesthood, and to be open to new answers and paths. The honesty and vulnerability I learned in my relationship with God through the *Exercises* began manifesting in other relationships as well, which confirmed for me that I didn't have to be perfect in order to be loved.

While it's a rarity that the freedom people experience through the prayers and meditations in Ignatius' *Exercises* leads them to amend a major decision in their lives, it did for me, and within a year of finishing, I left the priesthood and started serving full-time as a spiritual director. As you might imagine, those months of transition were marked with moments of great hope and peace, as well as questioning and suffering. Through it all, my spiritual director continued encouraging me to be honest with myself and with God regarding my deepest and most authentic desires. As months turned into years, I found myself more and more grateful for the freedom and vulnerability God and Ignatius taught me through the *Exercises*.

Finally feeling settled personally, spiritually, and professionally, I decided to go through the *Exercises* again at my own pace, but with a different focus. Rather than discerning my

heart's most authentic desires, I longed for the very same thing you do—practical spiritual help for living a wholehearted life—a life marked by authentic passion, generosity, willingness, availability, and selflessness. I desired more than simply feeling like I was on the right path; I desired to intentionally and wholeheartedly walk that path in a way that allowed God to transform me into the image and likeness of Christ I was created to be, and in a way that helped others to encounter God. As I continually took that desire to God in prayer, he showed me two important things.

The first thing God helped me to see was that wholeheartedness is primarily about going deeper. Just as a submarine can move horizontally, from one sea to another, and move vertically to various depths, God revealed to me that life is made up of two primary movements.

Like a submarine trying to find the correct “sea,” some of the decisions you and I face in life belong to the horizontal plane—they are choices about “which”—which vocation, which relationships, which job, which ministry, etc. Such decisions have to do with the *circumstances* and *relationships* of life. Those are the decisions that Ignatius originally intended to help people discern through the *Exercises* retreat.

Once the submarine of our lives moves to the place we most authentically desire to be on that horizontal plane, or where the circumstances of life take us, then we are given new opportunities to move on the vertical plane, into the deep. Rather than our decisions focusing on “which,” they become more about “how”—how willing, how magnanimous, how passionate, how wholehearted will we live in each particular circumstance?

CHAPTER ONE

The Wholeheartedness of Companionship

The Kingdom Exercise

Some people's lives begin with tragedy and challenges. That is how Ignatius' life began. Shortly after his birth in 1491, his mother died. Loss and disconnection continued for the child as his father entrusted him to a local blacksmith's young wife, Maria, to nurse him. Even though their house was only a half-mile from the Loyola family castle, Ignatius was brought up markedly disconnected from his own family. Such experiences of loss can leave us feeling desolate and lonely, and Ignatius' life was riddled with such experiences.

By the age of sixteen, Ignatius had lost his father and one of his six older brothers. While it would be expected that those losses would bring about moments of great loneliness, it's quite possible that the darkest desolation was the

loss of Ignatius' hope for glory, which a cannonball shattered when Ignatius was about thirty years old. Like so many young men of his generation, Ignatius hoped and fantasized about winning glory, fame, and women through his service as a soldier in the Spanish army. Yet, those hopes were crushed when a cannonball struck him in the leg during the battle at Pamplona.

Ignatius' recovery at the family castle was long and painful. He spent a lot of time alone, undoubtedly grieving the loss of his ambitions. In order to pass the time, he asked for some books; reading was one of his favorite pastimes. The castle, however, did not have any of the romance novels that Ignatius preferred, but only a copy of the lives of the saints and a book on the life of Christ. As he read those books, an important transformation and conversion began. Ignatius found himself connecting more and more deeply with the stories of the saints and Christ, to the point of experiencing companionship with them.

While he was often disconnected from others in the physical sense, he was growing in ever deeper companionship with the Trinity and the saints in the spiritual sense. His personal prayer moved from merely rote offerings to casual conversations with saints and members of the Trinity that Ignatius called colloquies. Those deep spiritual friendships rekindled Ignatius' wholeheartedness, but instead of being passionate about military service, he became passionate about serving God and others.

Like Saint Ignatius, you and I have experienced the desolation and apathy that come with feeling lonely and dis-

connected. My own loneliness and disconnection did not come from loss, but rather from fear. I spent most of my life fearing that, if I let others get too close to me, they would find out that I'm not good enough. I didn't come to that awareness until I was in my 30s, but there were signs of it much earlier in my life. For example, I remember being a senior in high school and my girlfriend and I were making out in the car before class and she whispered, "I love you," and all I could squeak out was, "Uh-huh." The look on her face indicated that my reply did not meet her expectation. I justified my response, thinking, "The words, 'I love you,' are *too important* to casually throw around!" I can see now that, in actuality, I was just afraid of saying those words; I was afraid of any intimate companionship that might lead to being rejected by others.

As you can imagine, celibate priesthood was a pretty safe place for me to fearfully hide from intimate companionship. Yet, despite the many layers of emotional protection that priesthood provided, God still found a way to challenge me to face my fear of intimate companionship, including through a sweet, elderly lady named Nancy, who sat in the back pew at Christ the King Catholic Church every Saturday evening.

Christ the King was my longest pastorate, lasting seven years. Just a year before being transferred there, I had finally learned how to spend time with God in personal prayer. I was enjoying praying about an hour each day and changes were happening within me. I can look back now and see that my commitment to personal prayer was slowly leading me to a new and deeper acceptance of love and companionship. As I settled into my new assignment at Christ the King, God

chose Nancy to be the catalyst for healing my fear of intimate companionship.

The vigil Mass at Christ the King was at 6 pm with confessions beginning at 5 pm. Each Saturday, as I walked through the back of church from the confessional to the sacristy to prepare for the liturgy, Nancy would hear me passing by and call to me. Even though she was legally blind, she somehow knew that it was I walking behind her. As I stopped and knelt beside her, she would whisper, "I love you, Fr. Tom." Despite how embarrassing it is for me to admit this, my response each week to Nancy's kind words was, "Uh-huh." I hated that response! It was a weekly reminder of my fear of intimate companionship! I found that more and more of my personal prayer time was consumed with sharing with God my frustrations about love and companionship.

Thankfully, after months of prayerful struggle, and months of answering, "Uh-huh," I was finally able to change my response and say to Nancy, "I love you, too." That response broke an emotional logjam in my heart and I found that love, companionship, vulnerability, and intimacy began moving through me like the Mississippi River, with strength and determination. I was able to be more present with people, not just physically near them, but more emotionally and spiritually *with* them. I doubt most people even noticed this change in me because I had become very adept at faking companionship and intimacy with people, but God and I noticed, and maybe Nancy did too.

Having companioned with hundreds of men and women as a spiritual director, I can confidently say that the fear of not

being good enough is the *primary fear* that every single one of us carries deep in our hearts. It's the wound that we struggle with most of our lives and, hopefully, it's a lie that is eventually healed through the truth that we are, in fact, good enough for companionship and vulnerable intimacy; we are good enough for others and for God. Coming to that realization, however, is not easy for most of us. In fact, we tend to be very creative about how we hide from that fear and wound. I, like many, hid in isolation and loneliness. I know that doesn't sound very pleasant, but there is an undeniable emotional safety in loneliness. And the aloneness and loneliness of priesthood seemed particularly safe.

Regardless of what caused our loneliness and disconnection, we know that they are very empty and dark places. They're desolate because they're contrary to how we were created. We were born out of the vulnerable intimacy of the Trinity and were created to live in companionship with God, others, and all of creation. Therefore, when the circumstances of our lives or the choices we make disconnect us from our companionship with God and others, it leaves us apathetic and desolate. Being disconnected from God and others keeps us from the wholeheartedness we desire. Ignatius clearly understood that truth and chose to cultivate the passion that comes from companionship. Maybe that's why he wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* with a profound emphasis on deepening our intimacy with God, ourselves, others, and all of creation. He knew that we were created for companionship and that such vulnerable intimacy would set our hearts on fire to live magnanimous lives of love.

Regardless of whether we choose to companion with someone, or they choose to companion with us, that loving connection can enflame and expand our heart, drawing us into courage and wholeheartedness. As such, companionship can be the very thing that inspires a husband to give up smoking, motivates a wife to attend Alcoholics Anonymous, moves a teacher to stay after school to help a student, increases a pastor's patience with his congregation, and deepens a parent's generosity toward her child. Not only is that truth confirmed by our experiences, but it is also confirmed by research, including five studies done in 2014 at Stanford University and a study at Yale in 2018. The results of those experiments show that when we have a sense of working with others it increases our participation and can even transform how we view challenges and struggles. For example, what seemed like difficult work when we thought we were alone can become playful and enjoyable when we believe that we're with others. Since life is frequently filled with difficult work and circumstances, intimate companionship must be a constant in order for us to remain wholehearted.

One of the first times I experienced how companionship can realistically lead to greater joy, passion, and willingness was when my sister, Vikki, asked me to help her move. A few years after Vikki got married, she and her husband relocated to Tulsa, Oklahoma. They asked me to help them move into their new apartment, which was on the third floor of a large building complex on 71st Street. As I pulled into the parking lot and assessed the situation, I realized that their question, "Would you mind helping us move this weekend?" was actu-

ally camouflaging the real question, “Will you risk your life hauling a full-sized sleeper sofa up two flights of stairs that contain four ridiculously narrow 180-degree turns?”

Very few people in their right mind would willingly choose to help someone move a sleeper sofa up two flights of stairs, yet I did. Why? It’s because I love my sister and brother-in-law and desire to be a part of their lives. My desire to companion with them filled me with willingness and joy, despite facing the nearly impossible mission of wrangling the cumbersome sofa up the stairwell gauntlet. Years later, as I reflected on that experience, I began to realize in a tangible way that human companionship is a powerful source of wholeheartedness, especially in circumstances where we would not have otherwise chosen to be generous and willing.

While Nancy and Vikki helped me to see more clearly how human companionship can infuse our lives with wholeheartedness and lead us to a place we would not have otherwise gone, God still needed to show me how *Christ’s* companionship could also enflame my passion and magnanimity. That’s very important because, let’s face it, there are times in our lives when we don’t have, or we *feel* like we don’t have, the companionship of anyone other than God. Thankfully, years after the sleeper sofa had ascended to its new home, and a year after being assigned as the administrator of a Catholic school, God taught me that lesson.

I was assigned to a school that had been struggling for a few years. People within the school who should have had the authority to make positive changes felt undercut and disempowered by those who should not have been making

decisions. That tension frequently spilled over into our school board meetings, drenching them in frustration. The school felt like a sinking ship, and I didn't want to be the captain when it went under. As my time was more and more consumed with the administrative details of the school, I felt increasingly detached from Christ. I knew I needed to bring those feelings into the light of spiritual direction.

Walking into my spiritual director's office, I flopped onto a large, cushioned chair across from him and vented about my fatigue in dealing with one particularly egotistical person at the school. After listening to my explanation as to why I was going to ask the bishop to relieve me of my assignment at the school, my director gently asked, "Where is Jesus during the school board meetings?" The question triggered a loud scoff from me and I blurted out, "Jesus doesn't want to have a damn thing to do with those meetings!" I knew that wasn't true, but it felt good saying it. I'm sure I unconsciously hoped my childish response would cause my spiritual director to say something like, "Well, Tom, I agree. There are some wounded people associated with that school and you need to be transferred to a place that is running smoothly and can appreciate your ability to keep things running that way." Of course, that's not how he responded.

The rest of the spiritual direction session was challenging. My director invited me to prayerfully imagine being at one of those school board meetings, focused on Jesus' presence, words, and actions. Through the experience, I came to realize that Jesus was not only present, but he was also grateful for *my* presence. Jesus needed me to be at those meetings, bringing

his encouragement, hope, healing, and love to the school. I was not alone, and neither was Christ.

Thankfully, my director helped me understand that my own ego was the largest in the board meetings. That awareness continued to deepen within me and, in the months that followed, I noticed that when I focused on the divisions and egos involved at the school, as well as my own fears and wounds, I felt half-hearted, passionless, and apathetic; whereas, when I focused on Christ's companionship with me in that ministry, I felt willing and magnanimous. It was a life-changing lesson.

How is Christ's companionship helping rekindle your life's passion, especially in that particular circumstance that has become dark and difficult? If you're like most people, you haven't yet asked or answered that question. While it's easy to note which family members and friends are with us in particular circumstances, reflecting on Christ's companionship can seem a bit daunting. Thankfully, one of Ignatius' meditations in Week Two of the *Spiritual Exercises*, known as the Kingdom Exercise, can help. It was written specifically to impassion us through companionship with Christ. Before we apply the meditation to your circumstance, let's take a brief look at it and how it helped a faith-filled woman named Madeline.

On the surface, the Kingdom Exercise seems pretty mundane, maybe even boring. Drawing on imagery that was common in the sixteenth century, Ignatius invites us to prayerfully imagine that a wonderful Christian king invites us to be a part of a mission. The king desires for us to journey with him, eating what he eats and sleeping where he sleeps. That sounds pretty boring, right? Well, here's where things get

interesting—the Kingdom Exercise is not meant to be theoretical, but rather, personal. In other words, we are invited to reflect on what our heartfelt response would be to a person whom we greatly admire choosing us as an intimate companion. Has someone whom you deeply admire ever chosen you for something special? Think about that for a moment. If that has happened, then you know the wholehearted response Ignatius is inviting us to experience in this meditation.

As the meditation continues, the focus is clearly on companionship—eating what the king eats, drinking what he drinks, and wearing what he wears—and not on what he wants us to achieve. In fact, nowhere in the meditation are we told what specific assignment the king wants us to accomplish. The focus is simply on how much we admire the king, and the gratitude, honor, and willingness we feel at the opportunity to be with him. Ignatius then invites us to acknowledge those feelings and apply them to the second part of the meditation—our companionship with Christ.

If our hearts are filled with honor, humility, and gratitude at being asked by an earthly king to journey with him, how much more will we be inspired by the Eternal King's invitation? Ignatius invites us to spend time prayerfully imagining Jesus inviting us to companionship with him on a special mission. As we reflect on what it is like to be so close to Christ, participating in a mission with him, we will undoubtedly feel a specific response welling up within us. Such meaningful companionship will most likely cause us to want to be more conscious of who Christ is for us and to wholeheartedly respond to his presence and love.