Chapter 13 from

The Great Conversation: *Nature and the Care of the Soul*

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Chapter Thirteen

Caves: Lewis Cave and Ignatius of Loyola

"The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek." --Joseph Campbell[1]

"It is not unlike a black liquid. The darkness has a life of its own. It stalks you. It crawls and creeps around you as you move. At every opportunity it seems to sweep up and cling to your back. You actually feel it sometimes . . . unrelenting and unforgiving. -- H. Dwight Weaver, *Missouri Caves in History and Legend*[2]

I'd been given the combination for the padlock on the steel gate at the mouth of the cave. Missouri caves are sealed to protect endangered gray and Indiana bats. But I had a problem. If I reached around the post to lock it again after I'd gotten inside, I wouldn't be able to see the numbers when I wanted to *un*lock it on leaving. Should I lock myself in with no way of escape until my friends from the Caves and Karst Conservancy arrived the next day? Or leave it unlocked with the possibility of someone coming in behind me during the night? Meth cookers from rural Missouri came to mind. Crazy things like this go through your head when you're spending a night alone in a remote cave down in the Ozarks.

Lewis Cave is in Ripley County in southwest Missouri, not far from the Arkansas line. The historic Natchitoches Trace passes nearby, a Native American trail to the Southwest used by pioneers in the nineteenth century. I'd taken highway 160 west from Poplar Bluff, passing through the county seat of Doniphan, population 14,000. The entire town, including the courthouse, had been burned to the ground by Union Army soldiers on September 19, 1864. They were taking revenge on pro-Confederate guerilla forces operating out of the area, hiding in nearby caves.

Lewis Cave was one of the largest in the area, located several miles north of town. A spring-fed stream flows from it into Big Barren Creek, eventually making its way to the Mississippi River. Back in 1930, the cave's owner, Mr. James Lewis, tried to make it into a show cave, hanging a few electric lights and charging admission. Apparently it wasn't showy enough and his project folded.

For thousands of years this winding passage has been carved by water eating its way through limestone. Southern Missouri has more than 6,400 caves, forming a karst geography full of mysterious sink holes and underground caverns. Folktales tell of giant cave bears lurking inside, moonshiners making illegal whiskey, counterfeiters and bandit gangs like Jesse James, even the hidden entrance to a lost silver mine. And of course, Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher lost in a dark cavern with their last candle burning out.

I'd arrived at the entrance of the cave that morning, having come prepared for the experience, or so I thought. I had the required three sources of light that you need for caving, a helmet, knee pads, extra clothing to keep me warm and dry. I'd been given a verbal description of what to expect. Remembering to avoid any side passages where I might get lost and to keep my head down as I crawled through narrow places. I'd been told that I'd be wading through knee-deep water several hundred feet in and to look for a notch in the rock on the other side as I crossed. But I was holding my pack overhead with water nearly up to my chest before I realized I

was headed in the wrong direction. Having veered off to the right, following the wrong notch. My first unnerving mistake.

With wet clothes, slippery shoes, and a steady underground temperature of 58 degrees, I needed to find a campsite and get into dry things. Eventually I located a relatively flat place where I could lay out my pad and sleeping bag. Where water wasn't dripping continually overhead. It was less than a thousand feet in, but far enough back so that I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. I spent the night there, alone in the dark.

The cave goes back more than 3,000 feet, opening into larger rooms here and there. It continues in an underwater passage even beyond that. Scuba divers are still exploring how far it goes. The sound of moving water echoes down the corridors like distant voices. Stalactites in the shape of soda straws hang from the ceiling, now and then reaching down in long arms of wet rock, even folds of flowing drapery. Blind cave fish swim in the dark water, albino salamanders you can see through, bats clinging to the roof. The cave's complete absence of light was unsettling.

Having fallen asleep after initially getting into my sleeping bag to get warm, I woke up totally unaware of what time it was. You experience a strange quality of timelessness inside a cave. Without the sun as a measure, time loses its sense of passing. It's always night; you're unclear about when it's time to sleep or eat or stay awake.

Leaving my gear, I took off to do some exploring further down the cave, wanting to reassure myself as to what was and wasn't there. I had to be careful on the slippery clay, especially when climbing over rocks. Most cave accidents are caused by loss of light, flash flooding, or serious injury from a fall.

Everywhere around me the cave walls sparkled in the light of my headlamp, due to dripping water or shiny mineral deposits. In the absence of all but a small circle of light you appreciate the subtlety of colors. Multiple shades of black and gray outlining the walls and ledges. Rust-red clay underfoot, straw-colored sand on the creek bottom.

I went far enough to hear the rush of deeper water in the distance beyond a high chert bridge. Then made my way back to the campsite. There I ate a meal of freeze-dried beef stroganoff and gorp with hot chocolate. Proceeding to journal into the night (or was it day?) as I tried to deal with what had been rising within me on coming into the cave. The Psalm in the lectionary for the day, number 139, was disquietly appropriate. "If I make my bed in the depths, You are there."

Entering the cave I knew I'd be physically safe if I took the necessary precautions. There were no monsters hiding inside. But of all the trips I've made into backcountry over the years, I had more fear in anticipating this one than any other. It wasn't just my misgivings about spending the night alone in a space five to nine feet high, nine to eighteen feet wide, and a half a mile deep. I was taking a lot of inner baggage along with me at the time as well. Struggling with my faith once again. Coming to terms with the enigmatic figure of Jesus who'd haunted me all of my life. Going underground, into complete darkness, is probably the *last* place you want to go in wrestling with God.

The Fear and Wisdom of the Cave

There are elemental landscape archetypes that reach deeply into the psyche, awakening unresolved fears. We've seen it already in this book with respect to wild fires, windstorms, canyons, and raging rivers. Tales of moving into a dark cave and finding one's way out again run through the folklore of many cultures . . . from Theseus in his labyrinth on Crete to Gollum's cave in the Misty Mountains where Bilbo Baggins stole the ring of power. Caves evoke an uncommon terror, even as they disclose an equally frightening wisdom.

Mircea Eliade observed that in archaic cultures the cave played an important role in shamanic initiation rites. It symbolized passage into another world. For the initiated the cave became a luminous place.[3] The Yaqui Indians in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona, for example, tell of a sacred cave on the slopes of the Red Mountain, Sikil Kawi. A half-mythical place that's difficult to find. The cave's opening is no larger than a small fox den. You squeeze yourself into a narrow passageway between the rocks, moving into the darkness. As you go further in, you sit on a log to rest, but the log turns into a snake wrapping itself around you. Wherever you look, wild animals move in the shadows—old memories of things you've feared all of your life.

But if you show no terror, an old man leads you into an inner cavern where any talent (any gift) you might ever have wanted can be seen hanging from the walls. You're free to choose whatever you desire. Maybe it's the gift of being a writer or a storyteller, the talent of playing the flute or carving masks, the art of training horses or being able to make yourself invisible. You only have to know what you want, and even that knowledge can grow out of the darkness there.

When you leave, however, you pass by a pit full of rattlesnakes. In that moment, if you yield to your fear—if you try to deny the frightening and broken places in your life—your fear will change you into one of the animals you'd seen in the cave. But if you get back to the world again (and one can never be sure)—if you carry with you the fearlessness you found as well as the gift you chose—you'll have the freedom to practice that gift with alacrity the rest of your life. According to Yaqui wisdom, appropriating your gift is a matter of handling your terror.[4]

Yet there are times when the fear of the cave can be so incapacitating that you can't imagine yourself escaping its horror. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* speaks of severe environmental phobias that affect some people, including maladies like nyctophobia—an intense and unreasonable fear of the dark, often accompanied by panic attacks, breathlessness, and heart palpitations.[5] It's an unusual, pathological fear, yet all of us are tantalized by horror stories and films about being trapped in a dark place or buried alive. We either love them as a cathartic release or avoid them in every way possible. Not wanting to go there.

I remember my first reading of Edgar Allen Poe's short story, "A Cask of Amontillado," playing on the fear of being imprisoned in a cave. The protagonist lures his enemy into the underground catacombs of an Italian town where he chains him to the wall and seals him in with brick and mortar as the man watches in horror. Audrey Hepburn, in the 1967 film *Wait Until Dark*, plays a blind girl trying to evade a desperate killer in her darkened apartment. In the cult classic film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), zombies attack people trapped in the dark cellar of a rural farmhouse.

Caves, in short, are places where frightening things lurk or where we try to hide from still more frightening things. In Scripture, the cave is a place for confronting the terrors of death. David hides from King Saul in a cave in the wilderness of Engedi. Elijah flees from Jezebel to a

cave on Mount Horeb where he hears God's still small voice. Jesus stands before a cave tomb, shouting "Lazarus, Come forth!" and Mary and Martha's fears are transformed forever. Moses hides in the cleft of the rock, where he can glimpse God's passing without dying of the shock.[6]

Caves literally carry us back into deep time. At Lascaux in southern France there are Paleolithic cave paintings of mysterious horses and stags over 17,000 years old. Gabarnmung Cave in Australia's Northern Territory has paintings over 35,000 years old. It's a virtual Sistine Chapel ceiling covered with images of crocodiles, kangaroos, and other sacred figures from the Dreamtime.

In some cultural traditions caves play an important role in creation stories. The Navajo in New Mexico speak of the first people (the Dineh) as emerging from underground, from a hole in the roof of the underworld. Their kivas are cave-like places dug into the earth for conducting sacred rituals. They have a hole in the center of the dirt floor (the *sípapu*) symbolizing the original place of emergence.

The cave is the womb of Mother Earth, a place of birth and renewal. In Plato's myth of the cave, the philosopher moves through a world of shadows into the light of reason and beauty. St. Benedict lived in a cave in the mountains southeast of Rome for three years before starting his monastic community. Muhammad, in a cave on Mt. Hira, heard the voice of the Angel Gabriel reciting the words of the Holy Quran. The underground chamber becoming a portal between worlds. A place of illumination, where the hero finds the dragon's treasure, where new life emerges.

Actual caves come in all shapes and sizes, depending on how they've been formed geologically over time. Solution caves are carved by surface water cutting through soluble rock. Rich in carbon dioxide, the water seeps through limestone or dolomite, forming a weak carbonic acid that eats into the stone. Mammoth Cave in Kentucky is a good example. The longest cave in the world, it has 450 miles of mapped passages, winding five levels deep into the earth.

Sea caves, like the world's largest in New Zealand, are another type, cut out of coastal rock by ocean waves. Glacier caves are caused by meltwater running through or under a glacier. Volcanic lava tubes are made when flowing lava moves beneath the hardened surface of an earlier flow. A lava cave forty miles long runs beneath the slopes of Kilauea on the Big Island of Hawaii. Speleologists explore the way these caves develop, the rock formations they produce, and the creatures that live in them.

I was stunned by what we found in Lewis Cave when my caving friends arrived the next day and we explored further into its depths. We saw fossilized rocks known as stromatolites on the cave floor, left over from the Paleozoic sea that once covered southern Missouri 500 million years ago. These are small rounded mounds built up over time from multiple layers of blue-green algae. They represent the earliest record of life on earth. The oldest ones ever found were more than 3.5 billion years old. There in the bowels of the earth, where life remains utterly foreign and scarce, I encountered one of the earliest forms of life on the planet.

Uncovering signs of life in the cave's darkness is what we hope for in the "dark night" passages of our lives. It surprisingly happens, if we wait long enough. Given sufficient imagination and grace, new possibilities arise. Ignatius Loyola learned as much at a significant turning point in his life, discovering unexpected gifts in an underground darkness. A formative cave experience gave birth to his Spiritual Exercises.

Ignatius and the Cave at Manresa

Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) was born in northern Spain to a family of the Basque nobility. The Basques have a long history of pride in their distinctive language and culture. They remain fierce defenders of the land they've held for thousands of years in the western Pyrenees. Basque, they claim, was the language first spoken by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The devil himself studied it for seven years, but never learned more than three words.

As a teenager Ignatius's father sent him to the royal court in Madrid, where he flourished as a promising young knight. His friends called him Iñigo, admiring him for his wit and reckless exuberance. He had an eye for the ladies and a readiness to fight at the drop of a hat.[7] When the French invaded the nearby town of Pamplona in 1521, he sprang to its defense, rallying his men atop the walls. But his career as a warrior ended when cannon fire shattered one of his legs. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life.

As he recovered from multiple surgeries, Ignatius read the lives of the saints and experienced a dramatic conversion. He envisioned himself becoming a soldier for Christ, beginning a new valiant quest in making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But he only got as far as the town of Manresa near Barcelona on the coast. There his illusions were shattered. Everything fell apart. Iñigo passed through a dark night of the soul, staying for almost a year, living in a cave for several months. Eventually starting to write his Spiritual Exercises.

From the mouth of a limestone cave near the River Cardoner, he could see the saw-toothed ridge of Montserrat ten miles away. He had previously stopped there, doing vigil and leaving his sword before the Mary altar at the Benedictine Abbey near the mountain's peak. Pledging himself to doing great things for God.

But in Manresa the harsh symbolic realities of the mountain, river, and cave came together for him. He'd always aspired to the mountain heights—striving to be the most impressive knight at court, the bravest soldier, and now the best of all the saints. Yet suddenly the grandiosity of his life—his immense capacity for self-deception—became painfully apparent. Forcing him down the mountain and into the cave. Facing the river's work in carving out the canyon of his inner life. It proved the hardest time of his life, undercutting the bedrock of everything he'd known.

For the first time he found himself alone without an admiring audience, with no one to impress by his reputation. The once-proud soldier fell into a dark depression over the hollowness of what his life had been and uncertainty as to what was coming next. The elegant courtier let his hair and fingernails grow, begging for food in the streets. He went day after day without eating. Swallowed up by a sense of desolation, he feared God could never forgive him for his sins. He was tempted to commit suicide, to throw himself into a crevasse in the depths of the cave.

But then a breakthrough came. The thirty-year-old cavalier had always been a man given to his senses: Beautiful women, fine clothes, the taste of good wine, the thrill of hand-to-hand fighting. He now sensed God speaking to him through the sensory impact of the surrounding landscape. He received a vision that he later described as the single, most powerful experience of his life. It came as he sat by the river outside the cave. He was suddenly aware of being surrounded by beauty. "The eyes of his understanding began to open."[8]

Iñigo perceived the whole of creation in a new light, "seeing God in all things"—a central theme he'd develop through the rest of his life. He noticed multiple layers of wonder that he

traced through the natural world, revealing God's sustaining love at every point. In the *existence* of bedrock elements like water and rock. In the flowering, animated *life* of plants. In the sensate *feeling* of which animals are capable. And finally in the sparkling *intelligence* of human beings. Each of these steps led him ultimately to an awareness of himself (and everything else) as a dwelling place of the Divine Majesty, suggesting the image and likeness of God.[9]

He also received a vision of Jesus at this time, seeing the man of Nazareth "in all of his humanity." The God he sought had to be anchored in this-worldly sensory experience, in God become flesh. It wasn't abstract ideas about Jesus that persuaded him, but specific and earthy images of a God alive in this world. He was drawn to Jerusalem, for example, so he could touch and see the actual places where the man had lived, this new Captain now demanding his loyalty. The notion of contemplating Jesus in the physical places he'd occupied became a thread running throughout the Exercises.[10]

Subsequently a new fearless integrity emerged out of his cave experience at Manresa. A new courage based not on Basque machismo and romantic chivalry, but on Iñigo's confidence that the world is filled with God's glory . . . and that it dwelt in him as well.

After returning from Jerusalem, he spent the better part of a dozen years getting an education, at first learning Latin with school children in Barcelona and finally earning a master's degree at the University of Paris. In Paris he gathered a cadre of companions who became the first members of the Society of Jesus, founded in 1540. As general of the order for the next fifteen years, Ignatius dispatched Jesuit missionaries around the world—establishing schools and colleges, meeting the needs of the poor, and adapting their vision of Christian faith to the cultures to which they came.

Ignatian Spirituality: Imagination and Soul Work

It's no accident that Iñigo began taking notes for his *Spiritual Exercises* in a cave. There in the subterranean darkness, he explored the complex of motives, attractions, and revulsions that stir in the human psyche—leading one toward wholeness or disintegration. This is the basic stuff of soul work, he came to learn.

Ignatian spirituality is different from the sublime, self-emptying mysticism we've seen previously in Farid ud-Din Attar, Origin, or Gregory of Nyssa. Its goal is union with God in Christ, but its starting point is human experience at its grittiest depths and heights. It dares to make a fearless inventory of what is and isn't working for us. Cutting to the chase in making decisions about what we finally need to do.

The Ignatian way insists that we encounter the divine Mystery not only in Scripture and the church, but also in the full range of human experience and the dark recesses of the natural world. He viewed the cave as an ideal place for examining the conscience, for probing the depths (and machinations) of the human soul. As Barbara Brown Taylor says in describing the work of spiritual direction: "We go to counselors when we want help getting out of caves. We go to directors when we are ready to be led farther in."[11]

Ignatius' Exercises are explicit directions for companioning others in the spiritual life, ideally over a thirty-day period given to reflection and prayer. He organized these exercises into four " weeks" or movements. In the first week he took his retreatant through something of his own experience in the cave, through a time of purgation and release. Beginning with an awareness of God's unconditional love and the hell of having said "no" to that again and again.[12]

He urges the directee to acknowledge the sin that separates her from God, how easily she shifts the blame to someone else, how her self-absorption has kept her from hearing God's voice within. During the first week, he suggests physically entering a dark place from time to time. Knowing from experience that praying with the shades drawn, being "deprived of light" can be helpful in confronting the darkness inside.[13]

This led, in the second week, to a decision-making point in the directee's life, when she chooses between two standards, deciding who she ultimately will love, what choices she needs to make. Then, in weeks three and four, Iñigo carries the directee into an intensive, thoroughly sensuous reading of the Gospel stories of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

In making the "Jesus story" your own, he explained, you have to use your imagination, inserting yourself into the context and geography of the tale. Incorporating what he called the "composition of place" and use of the five senses. Take Luke's account of the cave at Bethlehem, for instance, where a very pregnant Mary comes with her anxious husband. You smell the mustiness of the animals. Noticing a pile of straw thrown onto a hayrack nearby. You picture yourself as a servant girl hiding behind the harnesses and mule blankets, ready to help if she's needed. In short, says Iñigo, the extent to which you make the story your own depends on your ability to perceive it as actually happening in real time and place.[14]

This profoundly incarnational character of the Gospel was a primary concern for Ignatius. The nativity story happens to a homeless couple seeking shelter for the night in a dark cave. The point is to be captured by its down-to-earth particularity. To *enter* the place. Experiencing the same fear and courage felt by the characters in the tale. Sharing the swings of emotion that stir in the cauldron of faith.

The founder of the Jesuits was intrigued by the fluctuation of human emotions in the progress (and regress) of the spiritual life. He thought it important to monitor the movements of consolation and desolation as they come and go. In desolation, we're turned in on ourselves, struggling with confusion, feeling a loss of energy. In consolation, by contrast, we're happily focused on things outside of ourselves, feeling joyful, inspired, alive.[15]

He cautioned that one shouldn't suppose the "normal" spiritual life to involve only the latter. Consolation can be a form of escape as well as a gift—a starry-eyed distraction from what we most need to confront. Desolation, on the other hand, isn't necessarily bad. It may be God's way of breaking us out of patterns that no longer work. Better then, says Ignatius, to exercise a basic detachment (or indifference) to all the ups and downs of our lives.[16] Simply being *aware* of them, "discerning the spirits." Knowing what's going on inside, what games we're playing, how we're persistently being drawn to or away from God.

In my experience of anticipating the trip into Lewis Cave, for instance, I'd been struggling with a sense of desolation. Fearful that the cave might reopen shadows from the past. I'd been passing through a period of wrestling with the Jesus of my childhood again, wondering how much I could still believe. Torn between memories of being loved and fears of being judged for my persistent doubts. Normally I'd have approached a trip like this with consolation, looking forward to being alone in the wilderness. But I'd been shelving this Jesus stuff for a long time.

Entering the Cave: Seeing Jesus through Ignatian Eyes

Jesus was the principle reality in the life of Ignatius Loyola. He gave this name to the community he founded—the Company of Jesus. When I was led through the exercises myself, I

too was intrigued by the Jesus this Spanish Jesuit had encountered. A figure significantly different from my own childhood religious experience. Ignatius allowed me to reclaim the Scriptures—this time not as a didactic text aimed at proving a theological agenda, but as a transformative story luring me into its life.

For years I'd grappled with a Jesus full of contradictions. "You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it," says John Ames, the old Congregationalist pastor in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*.[17] I knew the old atonement theories of a punishing God—Jesus as a blood sacrifice assuaging the Father's wrath. I knew (and rankled under) the miracle stories of floating ax-heads and Jesus walking on water. I'd resisted exclusivist claims about the deity of Christ, his being the only way to God—leaving condemned those who didn't know him. Jesus, for me, was a carry-over from years of suppressed fears. Yet I couldn't escape him.

"Who Is This Jesus?"

This contradictory figure who rattles my cage and rumbles through the history of my life? Who proves an embarrassment and stumbling block to my mind, but who won't go away. This man who brings awe and tears to my eyes, who makes me want to resist authority when it's wrong, who points me to a God who works from the underside of every system of power.

Who is this Jesus? Disturbing teacher of the Gospels, comfortable with children and irritating to scholars, unsettling people by his enigmatic stories. Dancing member of the Holy Trinity, looking out from a stunning Russian icon. Object of saccharine devotion in the Sacred Heart of Catholic spirituality, the "Jesus and me" sentimentality of Evangelical piety, the unbridled passion of seventeenth-century metaphysical poets.

He's the first-century Jewish rabbi of the Jesus Seminar, calling for justice and inclusivity, making no ethereal claims about his own divinity. He's the Jesus of Jelaluddin Rumi, who wants to be born in the mystical experience of every soul. The Cosmic Christ who weaves his spirit through the fabric of the natural world.

This is the Jesus who lures and seduces my heart, who bugs the hell out of me, uprooting my comfortable white, straight, male, middle-class values. Roaming the streets with the homeless, far from the gilded crosses of suburban sanctuaries. Raging against those who would turn him into an other-worldly Savior, safely ascended into heaven, too distant to be real.

"Call me by *all* my names," cries Thich Nhat Hanh . . . and Jesus, as well. "I'm Warner Salmon's head of Christ," he says, "and the Piss Christ of shocking modern art. I'm Francis of Assisi's leper on the road to Perugia and Mary Oliver's snow geese announcing my participation in the family of things. I'm the grieving women of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the men of the military junta who've yet to learn that power is not truth. I'm the redwood trees cut down by Pacific Lumber and the out-of-work loggers whose families have to eat. I'm the young girl trapped on a boat of refugees in the South China Sea and the pirate who rapes her. I'm all of these broken, vulnerable beings, yearning for the wholeness and healing of the earth."

Who is this Jesus? I'm less concerned with *defining* him than I am with *experiencing* him. More taken by his vulnerability than by his claims of miraculous power. In the end, there's no escaping this . . . "Jesus, lover of my soul." "He walks with me and he talks with me and he

tells me I am his own." Affirming my doubts. Encouraging my yearning. Forbidding my indifference. I can't get away from him. Nor—at last—do I want to.[18]

Over the years, the Cosmic Christ had become central in my thinking about God—given my work on nature and spirituality. It's what New Testament writers see Jesus to have become in his resurrection (Acts 2:36). "The radiant light of God's glory . . . sustaining the universe by God's powerful command," says Hebrews 1:3. A universal reality, far wider than Christianity alone—or any faith tradition. A Christ who "was before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:17) We're talking here about a Christology that's global in significance.[19]

But in the process of focusing on Christ as a cosmic reality, I'd run the risk of turning Jesus into God's embarrassing stepson. An obscure, tribal figure in first-century Palestine, narrowly claiming only those who believe in him. To be honest, I'd given up on this Jesus.

Yet as I thought of going into the cave—back into the shadows of the past—I feared the specter of encountering him once again. A Jesus prone to judgment, rebuking my departure from the straight and narrow. Punishing me for my doubts in asking questions. Who might I meet there in the cave's darkness? I was surprised by how much residual fear I still had.

Then something happened. The night before I left, I went over to see Grandfather. Leaning against his trunk, I breathed into the silence between us, hearing a voice speaking deep within me. As if Grandfather himself were saying, "You know, Belden, there's nothing for you to be afraid of going into the dark of that cave tomorrow. *Who've* you been meeting every night all these years in coming over to me . . . if *not* Jesus? You stand in the wound of his side every night! Touching it with your hands. My bark, his flesh. Same difference."

There it was. The voice of a tree pointing me to Jesus in a profoundly Ignatian way. A Jesus "in-wooded" in the rough grain of tree bark, the earthy smell of heartwood. Standing in a city park where families walk their dogs and drug dealers pass in the night.

It was a gritty, earthy Jesus, readily merging with an all-inclusive Cosmic Christ. The one holding together the wide expanse of space . . . the other suffering out of love with every individual part. The two now seen as one: The universal and particular. Both discovered in a broken tree in a city park.

Yet there was more. As I leaned into Grandfather, he went on to say, "You know what's even *more* outrageous than you're finding Jesus in me? It's not your doubts about whether he's divine. It's the question—can you *imagine* this?—whether *you* are divine as well! Just like me. *Both* of us reflecting God's glory." That's what I heard the tree saying.

The next morning as I left for the cave in southern Missouri, I went without fear. Something had shifted inside. I realized I'd been misunderstanding this "Jesus problem" all along. It wasn't an intellectual conundrum about problematic biblical texts and doctrinal theories. It was about coming to terms with a disconnected part of *myself*—with what God had been trying to tell me for a long time.

Jesus wasn't *out there*, as part of the dualistic dichotomy I'd grown up with. He was closer, more intimate than I'd ever dreamed. Known as truly in a tree as in the core of my being.

A scandalous truth, you might say. Yet isn't it what Jesus prayed for his disciples (for the entire world), when he asked, "that they may *all* be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you." (John 17:21) Isn't it what Paul affirmed in saying, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ." (Galatians 2:20) Isn't it what God meant to do from the very beginning—making all things one?

Philosopher Jean Houston uses an exercise in some of her programs called "Are You God in Hiding?" Working with several hundred people in a large, dimly-lit ballroom, she'll ask them to close their eyes and wander slowly around the room. When they bump into another person they're to ask softly, "Are you God in hiding?" That person then responds, asking the same question, "Are *you* God in hiding?" They pass on to someone else, asking the same question over and over.

Beforehand, Jean has assigned the role of "God" to a single individual in the group. When you run into that person, asking, "Are you God in hiding?" you get no response. He or she is silent. But by their silence to your question, *you* become God as well, remaining silent when other people approach you. Gradually a stillness spreads across the room. She says it never takes more than a few minutes for hundreds of people to enter into complete silence. In awe at the fact that God is there . . . in everyone of them.

This touches on what Christian mystics speak of as the mystery of theosis or deification . . . our becoming divine. Entering fully into the image and likeness of God. Theologians of the Eastern Church affirmed that the destiny of the earth is to find its wholeness in God. Being *ingodded* is the hope of every created being. God wants to love each of his creatures, says Meister Eckhart, not as creatures, but *as Himself*.[20]

It's the mystery hidden in Greek and Russian Orthodox icons of the transfiguration. Not only is Jesus lit by a transfigured divine light, but the disciples, too (Peter, James, and John) *and* the entire mountain as well—the rocks, grass, and trees all ablaze. The whole of creation seen in its scintillating glory! Here Jesus is the Cosmic Christ, the *inside* of everything. He's Hildegard's greening, life-giving Spirit. Teilhard's Omega Point to which all things are drawn. The fundamental Buddha Nature of every sentient being, realizing its luminous quality. It's not something they have, but what they *are*. "Verily," says the Quran, "He encompasses everything!" (Surah 41:54)

The power of this realization—coming to me from Ignatius Loyola, a cave, and a cottonwood tree—is the assurance that if I'm being transformed into perfect love, there's no longer any room for fear. What I wish for is already within me. I simply count on Ignatius' permission to trust my imagination, Grandfather's agency in helping me do so, and God's longing to knit all things together in love. Making real the Great Conversation.

The Cave and the Season of the Elder

In many cultures the cave symbolizes the dwelling place of the spiritual elder or sage. In India it's the *sannyasin* (the holy man or woman) sitting before a sacred *dhuni* fire beneath a rock overhang on a high mountain. Having passed through the earlier life stages of the student, householder, and forest dweller, the *sannyasin* is "laying everything down" (*san-ni-asa*). Releasing the concerns that have long occupied him. Free now to share with others the wisdom of that relinquishment. The crone or wise man enters a wider community—becoming a citizen of the world, urging compassion for all.[21]

My own most rewarding endeavor in recent years has been helping to lead men's rites of passage in wilderness settings, raising up elders through the work of Illuman. This is a movement growing out of the teaching of Richard Rohr—assisting men as they pass into the second half of life, asking what it means to live for more than a career, moving into the wisdom and responsibility of mature men. God knows, the earth hungers for men like this.[22]

Three characteristics mark the women and men who serve us as elders.

1. They aren't afraid of the dark anymore. They welcome the silence and solitude of the cave, no longer frightened by what they don't know. The rest of us think it's safer to stay busy, keep the lights on, turn the music up, and pretend we have all the answers. "Our suffering," says Barbara Taylor," comes from our reluctance to learn to walk in the dark."[23]

Elders adopt a practice of retreating at times to a hermitage somewhere, maybe a cabin in the woods. They set aside a daily time for contemplative prayer in a dark nook under the staircase, a place to be still. The Russian Orthodox call it a *poustinia*, an intentional "desert place" into which one habitually withdraws.[24] For me, it's the cavity in Grandfather's side each night.

2. Elders also serve as trusted holders of the tradition. They stand on the shoulders of those who've come before them, knowing what's worth remembering, the stories that need to be told. Religiously speaking, this is more than a matter of "thinking with the church."[25] It means *wrestling* with the tradition as well. Making it your own, arguing with it.

A tradition isn't a dead weight that anchors you place. It's a pendulum, a weight in *motion*, swinging back into the past (for balance) and forward into the future (for what is alive and new). The elders show us how to keep grappling with what we've learned to love.

3. Finally, elders aren't afraid to speak their minds. They exercise a counter-cultural, prophetic role in speaking truth to power. They don't worry anymore about what other people think. These out-spoken old men and fiery women speak out of the depths of compassion for what they love dearly. They've moved, with Ignatius, from contemplation into action, from fear into love. Such is the core of Ignatian spirituality: a life of prayer that leads to authentic change in the world.

A community's greatest danger is being paralyzed by fear. It puts a stranglehold on love: Building walls, withdrawing into gated communities, arming itself against every perceived enemy. Danger is real, says the sage. But fear is a choice.[26] We deal with it by entering the cave of our own terror, finding there a love stronger than fear. It's the hardest work we do.

But it helps us harvest the gifts of spiritual darkness that Barbara Taylor identifies: "Familiarity with the divine absence, mistrust of conventional wisdom, suspicion of religious comforters, a keen awareness of the limits of all language about God."[27] In the dark place, we may have less certainty about what we've long believed. But there we unaccountably find ourselves set free from fear and made open to love. It took the voice of a tree, heard in the dark of night, to bring this home to me.

Turning Fear into Love

When my daughter was seven or eight years old, she too went through a time of being afraid of the dark. But then we found a children's book in the public library that she loved:

Mercer Mayer's *There's a Nightmare in my Closet*.[28] We had to read it three times that night before going to sleep.

It's the story of a boy who's been frightened by a nightmare hiding in his bedroom closet. One night he decides to deal with the beast. Putting on his toy army helmet, he grabs his play gun and loads the cork in its muzzle. He gets into bed, pulls up the covers, and turns off the light. But he doesn't go to sleep. He's armed and ready.

Slowly the closet door opens as a huge monster creeps out. Big eyes, huge ears, a long forked tale. Suddenly the boy turns on the light. If *he'd* been afraid of the dark, the nightmare was frightened by the light—especially as he sees a boy with a loaded gun aimed at him. "Please, don't shoot," the nightmare pleads.

The boy is torn. He's basically a non-violent kid, but the nightmare has scared him too many times. So he shoots him anyway. The monster begins to cry, crocodile tears rolling down his face. "You gotta stop making all that noise," the boy says. "You'll wake up mommy and daddy." But the nightmare's inconsolable.

The boy gets out of bed to calm him down, patting his hand. That helps some, but the boy finally has to put the nightmare in bed with him to stop him from crying. He tucks him in on one side and gets back in on the other. Just before turning off the light, he says to himself, "There may be more than one nightmare in my closet, but there's only room for two of us in bed."

He falls asleep—the boy and the nightmare snuggled contentedly in bed, a big lump and little lump lying side by side. On the book's last page, you see the closet door opening once again, with another nightmare peering out. Big eyes, huge ears, a long forked tale. Wondering if she can be loved in the same way as the first nightmare was loved.

My daughter *loved* that story. The next morning she came running from her bedroom into ours, saying, "Daddy, do you know what happened last night?"

"No, what?" I asked.

"Four or five nightmares came out of my closet and got into bed with me!"

"Wow," I said, "Was there room for all of you?" "Oh, yeah!" she answered.

So taken was she by the possibility that what had been most *terrifying* in her experience could also prove most *loving*.

Ignatius learned that in the cave. It's what a life of wilderness backpacking has tried to teach me. I keep coming back to a God before whom I'm completely undone—stripped of language, driven to awe-filled silence. But then a tree speaks in the silence of the night, reminding me that what I've feared has been longing for me all along. Who would have guessed?

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[1] Diane K. Osbon, ed. *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 13f.

[2] H. Dwight Weaver, *Missouri Caves in History and Legend* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 119-123.

[3] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 46-49, 51.

[4] Mini Valenzuela Kaczkurkin, *Yoeme: Lore of the Arizona Yaqui People* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 13.

[5] Similar afflictions include bathophobia, the horror of falling into or being consumed by depths, and claustrophobia, a fear of being enclosed in small spaces. See section 300.29, DSM-5 (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

[6] See I Samuel 24:1-22; I Kings 19:1-18; John 11:38-44; Exodus 33:12-23.

[7] A friend described him as "reckless at games, in adventures with women, in brawls and deeds of arms." See Leonard von Matt and Hugo Rahner, *St. Ignatius Loyola: A Pictorial Biography* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1956), 11.

[8] Ignatius Loyola, *Autobiography*, ¶ 30. George E. Ganss, ed. *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 80-81.

[9] See Ignatius' "Contemplation to Attain Love," a section of the Exercises that he probably wrote while in Manresa. See The *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. George E. Ganss (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992), ¶ 235-36.

[10] *Spiritual Exercises*, ¶ 47, 91, 103, 112, 192, 220.

[11] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014), 129.

[12] David L. Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 37.

[13] *Spiritual Exercises*, ¶ 79. Women like Iñes Pascual and Juana of Austria were among Ignatius' earliest supporters and some of the first to be led in the exercises. Katherine Marie Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

[14] Spiritual Exercises, ¶ 47, 110-117, 122-125. The tradition of a cave as the site of the nativity goes back to Justin Martyr in 150 CE.

[15] Ignatius' "Rules of the Discernment of Spirits," in the *Spiritual Exercis*es, ¶ 313-336. See also Margaret Silf, *The Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2007) and David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000). See also the <IgnationSpirituality.com> website.

[16] In the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises, Ignatius urges this "holy indifference." *Spiritual Exercises*, ¶ 23. He adds that consolation can be trusted when it's uncaused, not coming as a consequence of anything we've done. When it arrives of its own accord, we should "store it up" for future occasions when darkness returns. Desolation, on the other hand, can be soul-devouring, with "no beast on the earth as fierce." Meeting it requires immense courage; one shouldn't make changes in former plans when such an attack occurs. *Spiritual Exercises*, ¶ 318, 325, 330.

[17] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 6.

[18] Adapted from my article, "Who Is This Jesus?" in *Sojourners*, 45:4 (April, 2016), 34-37.

[19] Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (London: Collins, 1964); Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); and Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

[20] Eckhart's Sermon LVI in *Meister Eckhart*, trans. Franz Pfeiffer (London: J. M. Watkins, 1947), 142. See also Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002); and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[21] Bill Plotkin describes late adulthood as the time of "The Sage in the Mountain Cave." *Nature and the Human Soul*, 411-442.

[22] Illuman is a global not for profit organization committed to supporting men seeking to deepen their spiritual lives. See <Illuman.org>. Illuman also has a working relationship with the Mankind Project.

[23] *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 185.

[24] Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Poustinia: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1975).

[25] Ignatius' "Rules for Thinking with the Church," *Spiritual Exercises*, ¶ 352-370.

[26] Spoken by General Cypher Raige, played by Will Smith, in the 2013 film, *After Earth*.

[27] *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 13.

[28] Mercer Mayer, *There's a Nightmare in my Closet* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1968).