

Interview with Jack Kennedy, Ignatian Spiritual Director

Interviewer: Richard Groves

MONTH TWO

THE EXAMEN & JOURNALING

RICHARD: It would be helpful for us to hear more about why the practice of the Examen is the heart of the Thirty Day Retreat.

The Examen really is the central exercise of the 30 Day Retreat. It is an invitation to walk through our day (at the end of the day, if possible) and notice what was most life giving and what was draining... or, in other language, where I most found love today and where I least found love.

Ignatius asked people to make up their own daily Examen, meaning, there are many variations of this practice. At the heart of it, however, the Examen is meant to be a time to journey back through the day with God, or whomever you choose, in order to look at “What was for me a meaningful or a sacred experience in this day?” Now the word ‘sacred’ can be misleading here. So, I often will say, “Just ‘examine whatever was a meaningful experience for you today—or, note whatever is worth noting.” It may have just been your cup of coffee this morning. It may be a conversation you had. But it could also be a sense of guilt because I was insensitive to someone. So I just (with God, if that language makes sense) look at my day to see what I’m grateful for, what I have sorrow about... And the sorrow may not just be relative to an individual person or interaction... My sorrow could be about something I did, but my sorrow could be that the dolphins are dying, or my sorrow in that the planet is burning up and we’re doing this to ourselves.

In this practice I realize that with such sorrow God is also lamenting with me (or in me). So the Examen is really a chance to examine my reality, and since reality is a very abstract word, by that I mean, “What’s real right now for you.” You and me are talking, right here, right now, this is our reality. Once I name this, I can also ask how this experience is a sacred or meaningful experience for me?

RICHARD: That’s helpful. So we will be suggesting a different Examen each day but ultimately this practice is a challenge to pay attention to MY life and MY experience.

JACK: Yep, that’s what the entire tradition is really all about. I can only trust my experiences. But then, what follows is that I can connect my desires to my particular choices in life. From the big things to the small things. That’s when, at the end of the day, I also ask where would I like to be more intentional tomorrow, without getting into “a making progress model” or “getting better at something model,” but just how do I end up noticing in particular ways of being present, being more loving, or more compassionate, or more forgiving, or just more being satisfied that I’m living my values. This can all take the form of a prayer at the end of the day that goes like: Please help me be more intentional about this tomorrow without laying a trip on myself. This kind of Examen is not about feeling guilty. It’s about deepening my awareness of how I want to

be present in the world.

RICHARD: What time of the day should the Examen practice be done?

JACK: Traditionally people do the Examen at night. If for some people (because of work schedules of life circumstances) that doesn't work, you would be adaptable to whatever time of day works. In the Ignatian spirituality that I was trained in, we actually did this twice a day. But this is meant to be a flexible tradition. Ultimately, the Examen asks where is your growing edge or where do you want your consciousness to be more aligned with your values and your choices. And it's a very gentle process. Traditionally, it was "just me and God looking at the ways that we are hungering to break into the world tomorrow and be more present."

The Examen might even focus a lot around self-care. For example, it might focus around learning how to say "no" instead of saying "yes." Because if I'm saying yes all of the time, that might be taking me away from my deepest desires and sacred values. As an Enneagram Nine, my Examen often has a lot to do with self-forgetfulness. But as a spiritual director, I actually notice this pattern in a lot of types. In our culture we're so damn busy we don't have time to listen and hear. So the Examen practice may have a lot to do with good boundary making. If I'm more aware that I need spaciousness, that may be what God is hungering for in me, using my language again.

But back to your question about the best time of the day I would encourage people to just pick one time of day and try to stay with it. I would make the question real simple. Where was I living today and where was I not fully alive? Or, you may choose the word "loving." Or on another day you could ask, Where was I listening today? Or, Where did I give myself away to day instead of speaking my truth? Just pick one set of questions that reflects your experiences that day.

Also, the Examen is one exercise that is separate from the reflection or your meditation or contemplation. The Examen is an tool that looks back at the whole day but, it can be especially powerful if you do it as a prayerful practice. The bottom line tenant of Ignatius spirituality is, "Do what works and quit doing what doesn't work." So, if you try this Examen at this time and it doesn't work, try it at another time. You might get discouraged and feel like this doesn't work for me or, wonder if I'm not doing it right. With this exercise there is no right. Find a time and space that can work for you, and if none of it works ask your companion or others for help.

I'll tell you that having done this for many years, I don't have a specific time anymore because I'm kind of doing it as I go along. It comes from a lifelong habit that was imposed on me at first (in my Jesuit training) but now it has become something I freely do because it is lifegiving... the Examen is built into my awareness.

RICHARD: Can you also say something here about journaling. I remember on my Thirty Day Retreat with you, you strongly suggested it as another daily practice.

Jack Kennedy and Richard F. Groves
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JACK: Well, I don't mandate it, but I ask people if I can mandate it—if you catch my distinction! I'll say, this may or may not work for you, but if you're trying to track the whole trajectory of movements in your week or month, there is no way to do this without keeping some kind of record. When meeting with your director or companion, your journal may be the most helpful way to go back and look at where you have come from and where you start to see threads that your forgot were there. It's also a powerful way into discernment because I can begin to see confirmation of where I am being led.

So I would encourage journaling as the most typical way of reflecting among my own patterns that I might otherwise discount. If I don't write them down, there will be no way to track my growth which is often very subtle.