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The Spirituality of Immersion: Solidarity, Compassion, Relationship

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The Spirituality of Immersion: Solidarity, Compassion, Relationship

Michael E. Lovette-Colyer

While the term spirituality can be problematic, obscuring as much as revealing, immersion experiences cannot be understood fully without exploring the contours of what can only be described as spirituality. To the extent that they work, immersions effect change when they speak to the deepest longings of the heart. While manifesting in many different ways, the spirituality of immersion revolves around three major components: solidarity, compassion, and relationship. The spirituality of immersion is a developed relationality, a desire to enter into richer, wider, more expansive relationships with others, which naturally leads into deeper relationship with God.

I lean in, razor in one hand and shaving cream in the other. I struggle for the right positioning of my feet and legs, searching for the position around the wheelchair that will allow me to get as close as possible.

The elderly man – one of the *abuelos*, or grandfathers, cared for by the Missionaries of Charity – is a non-verbal stroke survivor. He cannot tell me if I am hurting him, so I proceed with caution; I watch his eyes closely for tears or any other sign of discomfort.

The cheeks are relatively easy. The feel of the razor on his week-old stubble is familiar; it feels exactly the same as it does on my face. I recognize the smell of the wool blanket, and of the man's sleepiness. For a moment, my heart aches with memories of my own grandfather. I lose myself in this shaving process, feeling an inexplicable but unmistakable intimacy with a man who cannot tell me his name.

Now I am on to the chin and, even more challenging, the space between his upper lip and nose. The more intricate the task becomes, the more I lean in. Despite the coolness of this morning in Tijuana, I feel sweat trickle down my back. I am consumed by the task at hand yet dimly aware that I am way beyond my comfort zone. When was the last time I was this physically close to anyone other than my wife? I keep going, intent on completing my task of offering this man the small dignity that comes from a fresh shave.

I am fully present in this moment. I am experiencing anew unfamiliar parts of myself; feeling, acting, living in ways that speak to the deepest longings of my heart that are too often buried by the stresses of daily life.

That morning, as our group of University of San Diego students walked into Casa Juan Diego – a dining room, migrant shelter, and hospice which the order of nuns founded by Mother Teresa operates – we were expecting to do service. We were not expecting such a powerful and visceral experience of intimacy, of solidarity, of God.

That experience of God is why I keep going back. In my daily life, a great deal comes between God and me: professional deadlines, demands, and conflicts; personal insecurities, difficulties, and frustrations. All of which serve to distract and distort my relationship with God.

In Tijuana, however, my usual defenses and preoccupations are no match for the central reality of life into which the poor draw me. In solidarity with them, I experience a clarity of purpose and an intensity of feeling that puts the rest of my life into proper perspective.

In Tijuana, the God of New Life consistently surprises me. This God unfailingly invites me to move beyond my comfort, let go of my preconceptions, re-evaluate my priorities, rediscover who I am, and open myself fully to God's love and grace. In Tijuana, the God of New Life greets me in the open arms of the poor, helping me come alive to praise, reverence, and serve.

This is the spirituality of immersion.

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The term spirituality is problematic. It can assume as many different meanings as individuals using it. Among millennial students, the word is frequently used defensively, indicating an openness to questions of ultimate import but in way that contrasts with, and critiques, a perceived narrowness of religion. The "I'm spiritual but not religious" (Hoge et al., 2001; Martin, 2010; ÓMurchú, 1998; Rausch, 2006) mantra is alive and well on college campuses, as is skepticism about committing to a particular faith tradition.

Recent research by the Pew Center for Religion and Public Life (2012) has drawn new attention to the shifting religious landscape in our country, especially among young adults. Published under the title of "Rise of the None's," the Pew study found that one-fifth of the U.S. public – and one-third of adults under 30 years of age – do not identify with a faith community. Yet, despite this generation's looser commitment to conventional measures of religion, 2/3 say they believe in God, 58% report often feeling a deep connection with nature, and more than 1/3 classify themselves as spiritual but not religious. It is becoming indisputable that the religious affiliation of millennial students is decreasing. The interest in spirituality demonstrated by this cohort, however, is enduring – and, according to the work of Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011), may even be ascending.

Based a longitudinal study coordinated by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, Astin et al. documented that during college, the spirituality of students demonstrates substantial growth. "Students become more caring, more

tolerant, more connected with others, and more actively engaged in a spiritual quest” (p. 10). Moreover, they found that 3 out of 4 of the students in their nation-wide sample reported feeling “connected to God and/or a Higher Power that transcends my personal self” while 4 out of 5 said “they believe in the sacredness of life” and agreed with the statement that “my spirituality is a source of joy” (p. 3).

Mindful that a primary difficulty with the term spirituality is the fact that it is an essential characteristic of all human beings that is expressed in an almost infinite number of variations, Sandra Schnieders (2000) helpfully manages this tension by describing spirituality as “a developed relationality to self, others, the world, and the Transcendent., whether that last is called God or designated by some other term” (p. 3).

Daniel G. Groody, C.S.C, (2005) articulates spirituality as “How one experiences, understands, and enacts one’s relationship with God” (p. 364). In other words, spirituality brings together the way one relates to God as well as how one lives out that relationship.

While the term spirituality can obscure as much as reveal, immersion experiences cannot be understood fully without exploring the contours of what can only be described as spirituality, however it may be defined. While they often include service activities; presentations from and discussions with community partners; social events and unstructured time with host families, churches, or communities; explicitly instructional moments; and formal reflection processes; to the extent that they work, immersion experiences effect change when they speak to the deepest longings of the heart.

Over the past decade, immersion experiences have become increasingly popular. The growth they have enjoyed in popularity has been mirrored by a growing consensus that the purpose of such experiences is not to fix problems or address deficits in the communities visited. While different institutions may express their purpose differently, the majority of institutions of Catholic higher education agree that one of their primary purposes is deep interior transformation, a transformation best described as spiritual. For immersion experiences designed and implemented from a Catholic-Christian perspective, one of the foundational aspects of that spiritual transformation is solidarity.

In contrast to pity or sympathy, Pope John Paul II (1987) defined solidarity as “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people... It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good... because we are all really responsible for all” (p. 38).

More recently, Pope Francis (2013) has illuminated the critical role of solidarity by writing, “This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us... they know the suffering of Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. We are called to find Christ in them, to

lend our voices to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (p. 198).

When it is experienced, solidarity is what infuses immersion experiences with profundity. Because the experience is often ineffable, participants struggle for words to express what they intuit; they sometimes speak of seeing with new eyes or feeling with greater depth. Some talk about feeling fully alive. Regardless of the precise words reached for, what they are often trying to express is the transformative and liberating truth that we are all part of one human family.

This is the truth revealed to me while reflecting on my experience of shaving that man’s face: His destiny and mine are one and the same. He and I are kin.

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One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Where is the seventh student?

We were supposed to have departed Casa Juan Diego 10 minutes ago. The seven male students and I need to meet our female companions across town at Casa de Las Madres – a similar shelter for women – in 20 minutes. Anticipating the unpredictable nature of Tijuana traffic, I know we’re going to be late. My stress level is high, and rising fast.

Who is not here? I systematically go through the students I can see in the small dining room with me, comparing the faces of the six helping the Sisters serve a lunch of soup and bread to the elderly men with the names on the roster in my mind. Finally it dawns on me. Jose is the one not here. Where is he?

I hustle out of the dining room and back track through the rest of the facility where we had spent the morning. Jose is not in the large dining room. He’s not on the patio. Nor is he outside where we had spent time washing windows.

As I enter again into the main building, I wind my way into the bathroom and then the sleeping quarters. There I enter a scene that takes my breath away: Along with one of the Sisters, Jose is spoon-feeding a man who is close to death and therefore unable to get out of bed. The Sister explains to Jose that this particular abuelo only wants to drink his juice, but he desperately needs the nourishment of the soup. The man cannot move his arms, nor can he talk, so it is Jose’s charge to spoon the right amount of soup into the man’s mouth and encourage him to swallow.

It is an extremely difficult and messy job. When the spoonful is offered before the man is ready and positioned just right, the man gags and the soup flies out of his mouth. When the spoon is too full for the man to take in, he chokes painfully, wheezes and coughs and spits, his whole body convulses, and he has to be gently calmed down before another attempt can be made.

When the spoonful is just right, however, the man drinks it down and acknowledges Jose’s extraordinary care with a pleasant sounding gurgle.

In order to deliver the soup as successfully as possible, Jose sits on the edge of the man’s bed and leans almost his entire body across the abuelo’s chest. Just as I was during the experience of shaving, Jose is in a most remarkable, intimate proximity with this man. Age, culture, nationality, language, and all other borders fall away. For a moment, Jose and the man are kin, grandfather and grandson.

Prior to this extraordinary moment, I had been impressed with Jose. His maturity, thoughtfulness and sensitivity seemed solid if not sophisticated, especially for a second year student. But I did not imagine him capable of such profound compassion. I did not anticipate his determination, his commitment to be present to this moment. I did not foresee the courage required to unflinchingly carry out the job assigned to him by the Sister.

Clearly, Jose’s experience was one of compassion.

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In ways analogous to the term spirituality, a definition of the word compassion is elusive.

The etymology of the term is clear; deriving from the Latin “pati” and “cum,” compassion literally translates as “to suffer with” (Nouwen, McNeill & Morrison, 1982, p. 4). Father Greg Boyle, S.J., (2010) offers helpful insight into what this might mean. He emphasizes that compassion is not “just feeling the pain of others; it’s about bringing them toward yourself. If we love what God loves, then, in compassion, margins get erased” (p. 75). By insisting that compassion is “a covenant between equals” (p. 77) he makes the point that compassion is empathy in action. To be sure, compassion is about feeling with another individual; but it is also about the process of going to be with that person with the intention of accompanying them in their suffering and then, in time and only if appropriate, to work alongside them to alleviate it.

While the difficulty of settling on one, universal definition of compassion may be understandable, the fact that it has been so long ignored as worthy of investigation is not. As George Valliant (2009) points out, “the impulse of one person to comfort another is studied less than almost any other major topic in general science” (p. 153).

Despite the massive amounts of research conducted on the impact of college on students (Astin, 1977, 1993; Evans et al., 2010; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Knefelkamp et al., 1978; Komives et al., 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) almost no empirical work has been done on whether, and if so, how, students grow in compassion during their undergraduate course of studies. A limited number of high-quality studies have focused on students’ faith development and/or spirituality; a small number of those treat compassion (or

altruism or some other related measure) as a subcomponent of faith or spirituality (Astin et al., 2011). Even with such indirect approaches, there is a scarcity of research; in the most recent comprehensive review of student development literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), there are no references to “spirituality” and only two references to “religion” (Astin, et al., 2011).

This dearth of research on compassion extends to Catholic higher education, which is especially puzzling since these institutions were founded to offer education integrated with the formation of values. To this day, many Catholic colleges and universities claim the cultivation of compassion as a primary purpose. The mission statements of such institutions frequently reference goals such as “preparing leaders dedicated to compassionate service” (University of San Diego, 2004). The ambition of such statements, however, is unmatched by a rigorous examination of the reality of those objectives.

Fortunately, this may be changing. Plante and his colleagues (2008, 2009), as well as Lovette-Colyer (2014), have documented the unique role that immersion experiences can play in fostering compassion. These studies rely on a definition of compassion from the field of psychology and, in particular, Richard Lazarus (1991), positing that compassion is “the state in which one is moved by another’s suffering, and wanting to help” (p. 289).

In unpacking the message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Robert McAfee Brown (1984) described the meaning of compassion as “to suffer alongside, to enter fully into the situation of the other, sharing whatever comes” (p. 112).

Without a doubt, Jose was moved by the suffering he encountered in that man and felt a deep desire to help. Later, when I asked him what he was thinking and feeling while feeding the abuelo, Jose responded by speaking about an overwhelming yearning “to help him, to help him eat, to help him feel a bit better” as well as to be with him “no matter what.” Moved by what he saw, Jose entered fully into the situation of the man, open to whatever was to come. Such a dynamic is common, if not always so dramatic, for participants in experiences of immersion. Freed from the pulls, pressures and anxieties of their academic responsibilities and social commitments, students are often able to see, feel and respond beautifully to the suffering of those they meet.

The particular words used are not important; central to the spirituality of immersion, however, is feeling the pain – and joy – of others, moving to accompany them through it, open to the growth such a journey will elicit.

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With the Palm Sunday mass almost complete, I stand along the wall in the back of the chapel, savoring the scene, marveling at how this small chapel – known as *Real San Francisco* – has been

renewed in the past six years. I recall coming to the site with groups of USD students to pick up trash, level the ground before the construction of the patio, build a retaining wall out of used tires, and do other odd jobs or simple manual tasks. As the years unfolded, we returned many times, usually to make a very small contribution. On one occasion we cleaned the desks and classrooms used for children's religious education; another time we were asked to paint half of the outside walls of the school. Regardless of what task the community asked us to attempt, the highlight of each visit was the opportunity to get to know the community a little bit at a time and, more importantly, to be inspired by the way in which they were mobilizing, sacrificing, and collaborating to make the chapel the magnificent home and heart of their community.

As the final prayer begins, I begin planning my exit route. The chapel is standing-room-only full of families. I am preoccupied with the need to reconvene our group of 22 students amidst the dismissal and the chaos sure to ensue when the pan dulce and other treats I can see outside are served. I have been instructed to meet Conchita, the matriarch of the parish, who will, I've been assured, have arranged host families for us. Find Conchita, I was told, and she will have everything worked out.

In the midst of worrying about how I am going to find Conchita, a woman I've never met and don't know how to recognize, I hear my name on the church's speaker system. "*Miguel. Ven, ven aqui.*" "Michael. Come, come up here." A woman at the front of the church is directing me to come forward for I know not what. With no idea of what is about to happen, I do as I'm asked and join this woman. When I reach the front of the sanctuary, Conchita introduces herself and explains that the matching of our students with their host families will be the concluding prayer of the mass. It is my job to call our students forward in two's and three's to meet their host families in front of the entire congregation.

With all the eyes of the parish on me, Conchita holds the microphone up to my mouth. I nervously call out the names of the first three USD students. As they maneuver their way through the crowd to approach the altar, Conchita quickly organizes the madres who will be the hosts for the next two days. Just as the students reach the front, the family appears and Conchita exclaims "*Este is su familia nueva,*" "This is your new family." The assembly breaks out in wild applause. The family members hug each USD student with extravagant joy.

This continues for the next ten minutes, until all of the USD students have been called up and introduced to their "new family." Once we are all squeezed across the front of the church, Conchita asks the congregation to raise their hands over us in blessing. She leads the community in a beautiful prayer that I cannot understand, partly because it is in rapidly-spoken Spanish but mostly because I am overwhelmed at the beauty of the moment.

This is your new family. This is the spirituality of immersion.

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"Kinship – not serving the other, but being one with the other" (Boyle, 2010, p. 188). That's how Greg Boyle describes it. It took six years to realize fully what was always true.

For six years we did our best to show up one Saturday a month to get to know our neighbors in Real San Francisco and the surrounding community. We usually tried to do some service. But the service, the doing, was never the point. The service was simply something to keep us occupied so that the real work could unfold – the work of realizing that we are family. Or, as Mother Theresa famously put it, "That we belong to one another."

The spirituality of immersion depends on relationship, and relationships take time. Too often the connectivity and productivity offered to us by technology desensitizes us to this basic reality. High achieving college students and those of us charged with forming them too easily forget that our task is not to produce or accomplish. It is, instead, to be and to be with.

Today, Catholic higher education faces unprecedented pressure – usually from a corporate, for-profit perspective – to demonstrate its value, to prove its outcomes. While concern over the cost of tuition and student debt levels is commendable, this pressure, if not critically examined, can lead to a tragic commodification. Preparation for high-paying jobs or reputable careers eclipses the original purpose of the liberal arts and Catholic higher education: the fostering of our students' full humanity (Kronman, 2007; Lewis, 2006).

Immersion experiences offer a valuable contrast. The education they offer, and which our institutions aspire to offer, is about "connecting all the meaningful parts of being human and the increasingly important challenge of how we live together in our time on earth" (Nepo, 2010, p. viii).

At their deepest level, immersion experiences and spirituality share the same essence – relationship. Both revolve around and depend on "developed relationality." The best word for the way in which an expanded imagination of relationality becomes enacted in our lives is "spirituality."

In my many years of working with college students, I've never witnessed a better, more vivid, compelling and life-giving manifestation of spirituality than what took place during that Palm Sunday mass. It was an exquisite experience of developed relationality as well as a privileged moment of experiencing, understanding and enacting our relationship with God.

The essence of the spirituality of immersion is realizing that our relationship with others is how we develop and grow in our relationship with God. In fact, as theologian Michael Himes (2004) puts it, only by "loving one another" do we "find out what the word 'God' means" (p. 45).

This is the spirituality of immersion. Richer, wider, more expansive relationships with others leads us to deeper relationship with God.

As we leave behind the security of our comfort zones to enter into the mysterious intimacy of solidarity we do so in the hope of being transformed by mutual relationships. In so doing, we discover anew the old truth that we are kin. And, in the process, we realize, at least some of the time, that God's greatest desire for us is the same as our own deepest desire: that we might be one.

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