



Fall 2011

A Rough Entry into the Spiritual Exercises

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I came to Bridges in 1997. I was searching for some kind of spiritual formational program to help me integrate spirituality and psychology. During that year, three people told me about the Spiritual Exercises. After the 3rd time, I said "OK, God. I heard you!", and I signed up to do the Exercises through Bridges. Dr. Mary Mondello was my companion. She got me through a tough year, always with warmth, patience, and acceptance. I am eternally grateful to the gift of her presence and wisdom!

Now, it was a rough year because there was much "exorcizing" - cleaning house and getting rid of baggage. As soon as Mary introduced the Principles and Foundations, I had reactions. Yes, I BELIEVE in a God of Love, but I did not EXPERIENCE the God of love. Growing up as the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, I came to know a God who judges, demands, and punishes. So my reaction to Psalm 139 verse 7 "I can never get away from your presence" was one of fear. Terror more like it. Instead of feeling "wonderfully made" (verse 14), I felt worn out from trying so hard to be a "good" Christian.

Then came the First Week on Sin. I really felt persecuted. Haven't I already felt enough guilt? I often thought that the letter

G was branded on my forehead because I felt guilty about everything! I saw God's big index finger pointing out my flaws. I had nowhere to hide from my shame.

It took much sorting, sometimes through anger, for me to find my way to the God of Love. Mary was with me every step of the way, gently and lovingly present throughout the process. I felt the acceptance to bring everything I was, wounds and all, to the Exercises, to God, and to her, and experienced the graces of transformation gradually. I came to understand that sin is not about fear and shame. Fear and shame come from a negative image of God and of self. But when I can be rooted in the experience and faith of God's love, I can look at my sins with a longing to surrender them so I can become more what God had intended and created me to be. Perfect love casts out fear. Instead of wanting to hide from God because of my shame, I feel drawn towards God to let God shape and form me in God's Loving image.

There's a lot more to the story. But I won't bore you with details. Like many of you, I came to love the Exercises and the people who continue to stay with and serve through Bridges. To me, the Spiritual Exercises is a way of living and praying, of relating to God, and of living in radical honesty. I found the freedom to love and serve God through the Exercises. I know many of you did, too. I look forward to hearing your stories!