

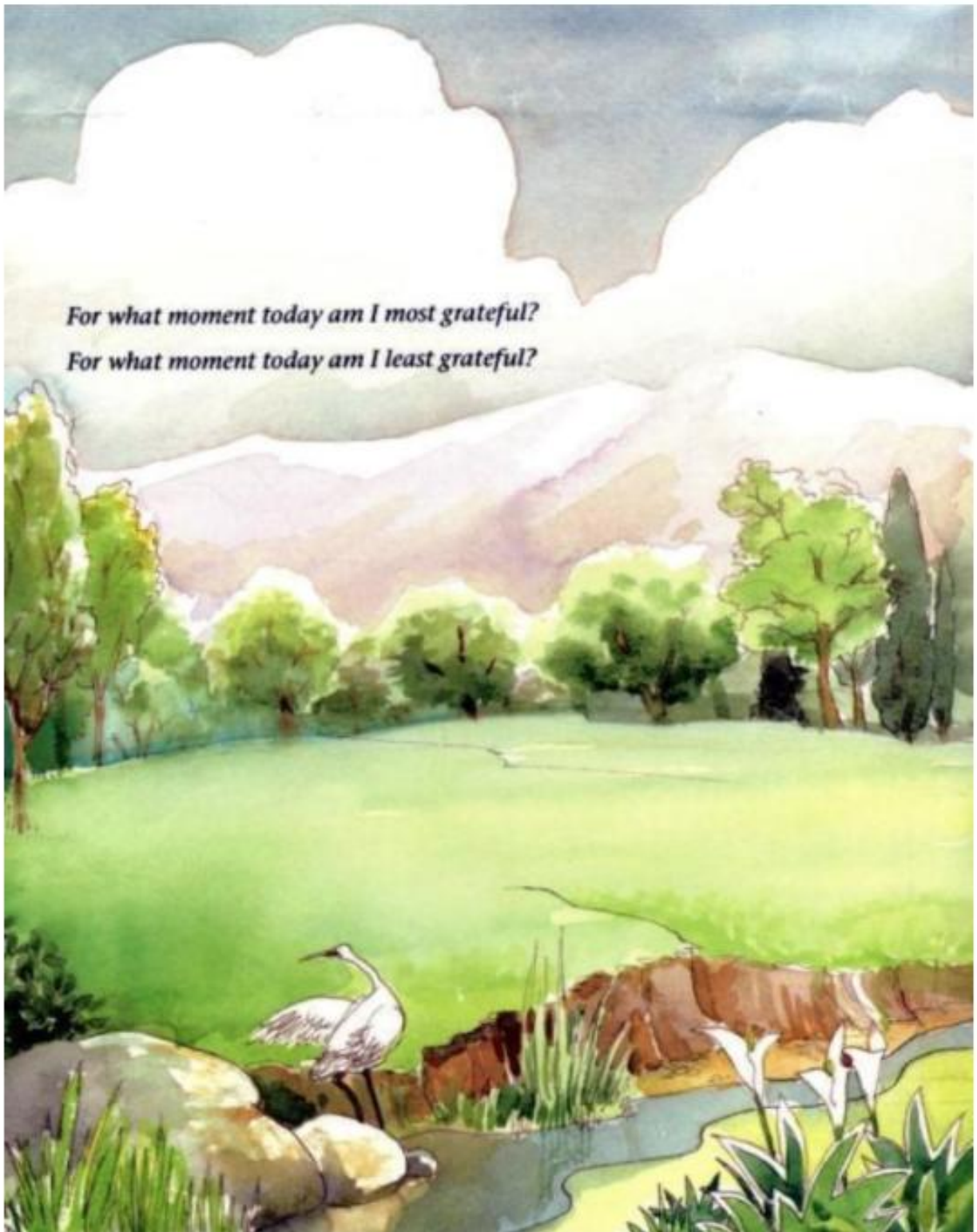
Part I

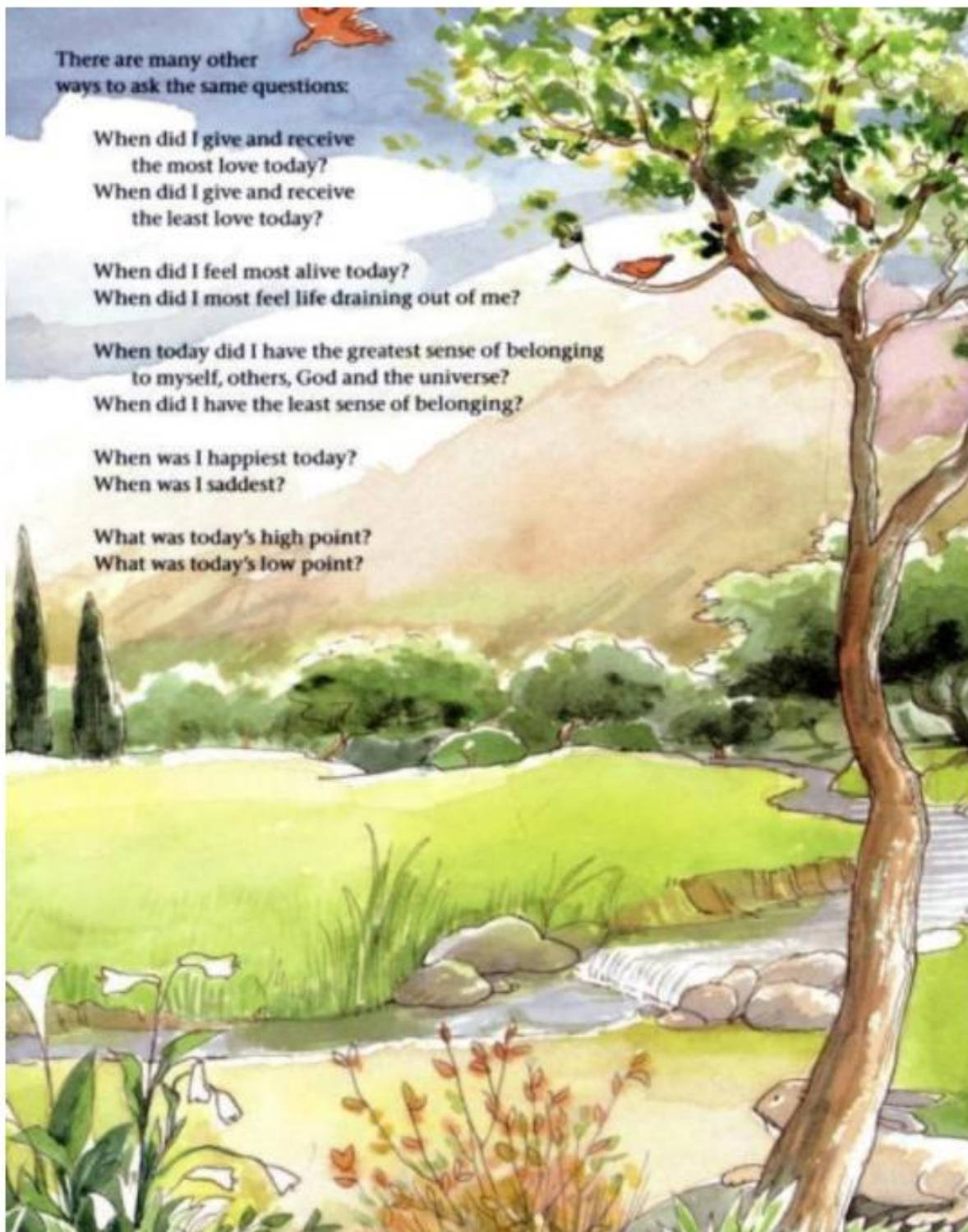
The Examen



For many years, we have ended each day the same way. We light a candle, become aware of God's loving presence, and take about five minutes of quiet while we each ask ourselves two questions.

*For what moment today am I most grateful?
For what moment today am I least grateful?*





There are many other ways to ask the same questions:

When did I give and receive the most love today?

When did I give and receive the least love today?

When did I feel most alive today?

When did I most feel life draining out of me?

When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe?

When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When was I happiest today?

When was I saddest?

What was today's high point?

What was today's low point?

Then we share these two moments with each other. Usually the entire process takes about twenty minutes. When we are very sleepy, we can easily

finish in ten. We call this process the examen.



Several nights ago when we did this process together, here is what happened. For each of us, our moments of desolation had to do with the health of Matt and Dennis' father, Sheila's father-in-law. We had planned to take Matt and Dennis' father and mother on a Christmas holiday vacation at a cousin's home in Florida. We canceled the vacation because Dad had too much pain in his leg. That day he had told us he was thinking of selling the home he had lived in for fifty years. He asked us to pray for him to die. Our desolation that evening included grieving the lost holiday vacation and especially imagining what it

would be like to live without our Dad or our home.

All three of us also mentioned the same consolation, a conversation we had earlier that day about the examen. It was triggered by a phone call from one family and a letter from another, telling us how much the examen had added to their lives. We realized how often the examen had given us life. Even now, in the midst of our desolation over Dad's health, the process of sharing these feelings with one another in the examen was giving us the strength to cope with the situation. Because the examen was giving us so much life, we decided that, since we would be at home rather than in Florida, we would spend the next week beginning this book. With all our books we have found that whatever we write about becomes more alive for us as we share it with others. So, we knew that the examen would become even more life-giving for us as we share it with you.



The Examen Can Guide Our Lives

The examen makes us aware of moments that at first we might easily pass by as insignificant, moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives. For example, one day we were at an English/Spanish conference in the U.S. where the Anglos played music in the morning and the Hispanics played in the afternoon. That evening at examen, the moment all three of us were least grateful for was the same: the way the conference had dragged when the Anglos played. Our moment of most gratitude was also the same: the Hispanic group and how their music revived the conference.

At first glance, those two moments seemed insignificant. But during the next few months, we all noticed a pattern in which often our moments of gratitude centered around Hispanic people. If this had only happened a few times, we might have ignored it. But because we did the examen regularly and Hispanics were so often our experience of consolation, we realized we were in touch with something significant. We finally took time to ask ourselves what we should do about it. We knew that God's will for us is, whenever possible, to do more of whatever gives us the most life or gratitude. So, we decided to study Spanish in Bolivia and spend the following three years giving retreats in Latin America. Insignificant moments when looked at each day become significant because they form a pattern that often points the way to how God wants to give us more life.

When Other People Want Us To Tell Them What To Do

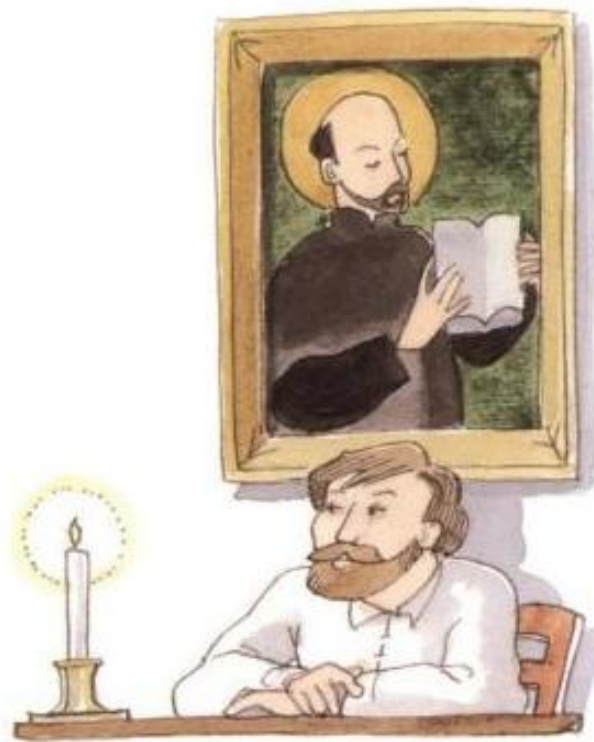
Many people who come to us bring questions such as, "Should I change jobs?" "Should I spend more time at home or in serving others?" "What can help me with my depression?" If we took responsibility for answering all these questions, we would exhaust ourselves and mislead others. However, the examen has given us a way of responding that protects us from pretending to be gurus who have all the answers and also protects the questioner from denying his or her own inner wisdom. We usually suggest that the person spend the next month focusing each day on what gave life and what drained life. Such people often return a month later having discovered from their own experience what they should do more of and what they should do less of in order to resolve their problem. The will of God is that we give and receive more love and life.



Everyday Experience Is Divine Revelation

St. Ignatius wrote *The Spiritual Exercises*, which have guided retreatants for centuries. The *Exercises* begin by recommending that everyone be taught the examen. Ignatius would not have been surprised that the examen revealed a direction for our life, since the examen is what changed him from a wild soldier to a pilgrim walking barefoot to Jerusalem. He expected that God would speak through our deepest feelings and yearnings, what he called “consolation” and “desolation.” For us, consolation is whatever helps us connect with ourselves, others, God and the universe. Desolation is whatever disconnects us. Ignatius recommended returning to our deepest moments of consolation and desolation. We do this because,

It is wisely said, “Experience is the best teacher.”... The primary and most obvious reason for this is that revelation is not over, God is constantly revealing himself to us in our experience. . . . Of course, the Bible is divine revelation—no one denies that. *But so is life!* It is precisely because God is present to life and available to human experience that *we* have a divinely inspired story to tell, and that the story once told is revelation.



One reason we light a candle when we do the examen is because the candle's flame symbolizes the light of divine revelation in our everyday experience. The gratitude questions we use are simply one way of discovering the day's consolation and desolation, the interior movements through which divine revelation unfolds. Ignatius saw the examen as the cornerstone of spiritual life to the extent that when the Jesuits at the Council of Trent asked if they could skip their prayer exercises because they had no time, Ignatius told them to skip anything but the examen.

Finding Our Sealed Orders

As we do this examen process every day, a pattern emerges that is even deeper than the pattern that leads to a specific decision such as our commitment to study Spanish in Bolivia. Agnes Sanford referred to this pattern as our “sealed orders” from God. By this she meant that it is as if, before we were born, each of us talked over with God the special purpose of our time on earth. Throughout our lives each of us discovers more and more deeply our unique sealed orders, a way that only we are gifted to give and receive love.



When I (Sheila) am in touch with the special purpose of my life and carrying out my sealed orders, I have a profound feeling of consolation or rightness and my whole body relaxes. I believe this sense of rightness expresses itself physiologically because the purpose of our life is built into the very cells of our body.

I have noticed this sense of rightness whenever I am in touch with or learning about the inner goodness of created things. Looking back, I realize that this has guided all my major decisions in life. I became a Christian (my family is

Jewish) because I sensed the presence of Jesus in nature. I went to seminary (instead of a graduate program in psychology) because I wanted to learn about the presence of God in human development. In seminary I took every course on science and theology and ultimately became a Roman Catholic because of Catholicism's profound incarnational sense—its recognition of the presence of God in all things. I married Dennis because he shares my joy in finding this goodness in creation.

Because the purpose of our lives is built into every cell of our bodies, we don't need to look far to find it. We can find it by looking near, in the little everyday things that give us consolation and desolation. I experience consolation when I see the leaves of a plant turned toward the sun, when I sense the vitality in whole foods as I prepare them, or when I feel the life energy in natural cotton clothing. Many such moments have suggested to me that my sealed orders are to recognize the face of God in all things and to help each thing become more truly itself by my loving presence to it.

Moments of desolation are equally instructive. Recently we gave a retreat at which we spoke about the presence of God in evolution. A few of the participants objected strenuously and with considerable hostility, insisting that evolution is "against the Bible." I felt great sadness and at a loss as to how to communicate with these people. I have learned from this and similar experiences that I am not gifted to work with people with whom I cannot share my love for the created world.

Robert Johnson suggests that we summarize the special purpose of our life in a single word or phrase that "names" who we are. Once we know who we are, we also know who we are not. We know where and with whom we belong, and we can cease trying to be all things to all people. As I have reflected on the pattern of consolation and desolation in my life, the name that fits my experience is "cherishing every creature's inner goodness."

Examen Process

Preparation: You may wish to light a candle. Do whatever helps you to experience unconditional love. For example, imagine yourself in a favorite place with someone whose love you trust, such as a friend, Jesus or God as you understand God. Put your feet flat on the floor, take a few deep breaths from the bottom of your toes, up through your legs, your abdominal muscles and your chest. Breathe in that unconditional love, and when you breathe out, fill the space around you with it.

1. Place your hand on your heart and ask Jesus or God as you understand God to bring to your heart the moment today for which you are *most grateful*. If you could relive one moment, which one would it be? When were you most able to give and receive love today?

Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so special. Breathe in the gratitude you felt and receive life again from that moment.

2. Ask God to bring to your heart the moment today for which you are *least grateful*. When were you least able to give and receive love?

Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult. Be with whatever you feel without trying to change or fix it in any way. You may wish to take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just as you are.

3. *Give thanks* for whatever you have experienced. If possible, share as much as you wish of these two moments with a friend.