Readings for Eyes to See

Note for Readers: Allow at least 20 seconds of time in-between each reading.

[READER 1]
For some Americans, the revelation that racism is alive and well has upended assumptions that the United States has been marching slowly and steadily toward equity and racial justice. Some who considered themselves more enlightened on matters of race are now brought up short – discovering dimensions and depths of racism around and within themselves that are even more pervasive than they had imagined. Like the aperture on a camera, the racial reckoning of our nation is bringing the reality of racism into sharp and painful focus. This is a familiar picture for Black Americans. But, whether these realities are new to us or not, none of us can un-see them now.

[Pause]

[READER 2]
"Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and the object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future. Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual or physical homicide upon the out-group." ~ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

[Pause]

[READER 3]
We human beings are amazingly capable of self-deception. Our ability to look honestly at ourselves and at the effects of our actions (or inaction) is inhibited by a whole host of factors. The fear that our faults will make us less lovable to others; ignorance of our family and national histories; apprehensions over upsetting the boundaries between "us" and "them"; and the dread of being overwhelmed by problems beyond our control are but a few. Until we are inescapably confronted with a problem, the temptation is to rush through our days with little time for reflection. We can unwittingly skate on the surface of our own lives.

[Pause]

[READER 4]
"Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is not cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness." ~ First Letter of John
Ignatius was not a person of the 21st century, but he had insights into the hearts and minds of people that endure to this day. Among the anchors of his spirituality was the conviction that we must stop, on a regular basis, to notice the activity and leadings of God in our lives, in order to stay tethered to ourselves and to the holy purpose for which we are made. As part of the *Spiritual Exercises*, he required that Jesuits do this twice a day: that they see clearly whatever reality was in front of them, and open themselves to it, thereby becoming more authentically human. He called this practice the Examen.

... They should practice the seeking of God's presence in all things, in their conversations, their walks, in all that they see, taste, hear, understand, and in all their actions.... This kind of meditation, which finds God our Lord in all things, is easier than raising oneself to the consideration of divine truths, which are more abstract and which demand something of an effort, if we are to keep our attention on them.” ~ St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Most of us, when we're in a crisis, fall back on what we know. We talk with trusted friends and family, return to books and music that have sustained us, pray or reflect, and rely on whatever has brought us insight in the past. It is comforting that we don't need to invent these practices. They are there for us whenever we reach for them. The Examen comes to us as this kind of gift. It is familiar and enables us to see what had been obscured or invisible before – hiding in plain sight. So it is no surprise that we turn to the Examen now, as a community of colleagues – each with our own histories and experiences of race and racism – to see what had been hidden to us, which is now in plain sight.

"Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches of other lives – tried to imagine what the crisp fringes, full of honey, hanging from the branches of the young locust trees, in early morning, feel like? Do you think this world was only an entertainment for you?” ~ Mary Oliver
Jesuit schools are lauded for their culture-embracing orientation. Called by some, the “thinkers of the Church,” Jesuits shaped their institutions with the same élan of social commitment and clear-eyed inquiry that drove Ignatius and his friends to serve at the margins of society. Whatever our role in the college or university might be, we share in that spirit and in all aspects of our institution’s history and identity. We share in its mission at the most basic and profound level.

But institutions are capable of the same spiritual blindness as individuals, both historically and in the present. To be credible, college and university communities, like persons, need to stop and notice the unvarnished reality of our common life, to observe where we have met the moment and where we have failed – to consider who is truly included when we refer to “Us.” Racism, the original sin of our country, mocks our mission and casts doubt on our commitment to human dignity. It dehumanizes us all. In this light, the Examen is not merely a practice for personal reflection. It also is our rough-hewn doorway to institutional transformation.

“For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” ~ Gospel of Matthew