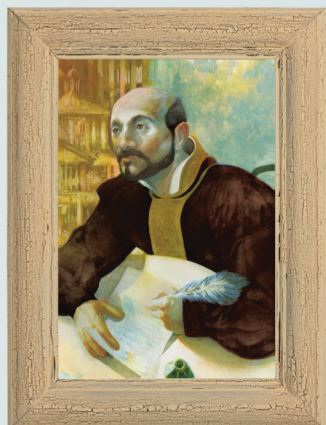


MARGARET SILF



Just call me López

*Getting to the Heart
of Ignatius Loyola*



Just call me López

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Getting to the Heart of Ignatius of Loyola

MARGARET SILF

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3441 N. Ashland Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60657
(800) 621-1008
www.loyolapress.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Silf, Margaret.

Just call me López : getting to the heart of Ignatius Loyola / Margaret Silf.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8294-3668-6

ISBN-10: 0-8294-3668-5

1. Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, 1491-1556. 2. Christian saints--Spain--Biography.
3. Spiritual life--Catholic Church. 4. Spirituality--Catholic Church. I. Title.

BX4700.L7S55 2012

271'.5302—dc23

[B]

2012013605

Printed in the United States of America.

12 13 14 15 16 17 Bang 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For López with heartfelt gratitude,
and for all friends of López, past, present, and to come,
especially those who are also friends of mine*

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Foreword

I have heard Jesuits nervously joke that they have no fear of coming face-to-face with Almighty God in Heaven, but are filled with trepidation at the prospect of meeting Ignatius of Loyola!

The biographies I've read of Ignatius over the years have done little to diminish his reputation of being somewhat fierce and forbidding. Having said that, I've noted that his contemporaries—the people who actually were with him and worked alongside him—all seemed to love him and to enjoy being with him.

It was with this in mind that I asked Margaret Silf—someone with a profound insight into Ignatian spirituality—to consider writing a short book about Ignatius that wouldn't be simply another biography

but would give a twenty-first-century reader insight into this man's humanity. I asked for a telling of his story that would help us better understand what Ignatius's spiritual experiences offer us, even today.

Margaret has written a powerful work of imagination that places us with Rachel, our narrator, in contact with "López" (this is one part of Ignatius's full name) at pivotal moments in his life. We are rooted with Rachel in the present; it is Ignatius who somehow "time shifts" to be with us. This requires some suspension of disbelief, but it is a small price to pay for being allowed to listen to these two spiritual companions who have so much to learn from each other.

Margaret has succeeded not only in showing us Ignatius's warm and compassionate character, but she also introduces us to the important stages in his journey (a timeline is provided at book's end) and gives an excellent outline of his famous "Spiritual Exercises."

I love what Margaret has written here. I hope you do, too.

Paul Brian Campbell, SJ
March, 2012

Preface

*I*walked along the beach one morning and noticed something glinting in the sand. When I stooped to pick it up, I had in my hand just a piece of broken glass. I could easily have hurt myself on it, but instead I held it between my fingers and watched as the sun's rays fell upon it. A miracle happened. The invisible light of the sun suddenly became visible in a whole spectrum of color as the light was refracted—bent!—through the broken glass, to create a rainbow.

Miracles so often happen in the midst of brokenness, inadequacy, and failure. In fact, those experiences would seem to be God's preferred location for the work of transformation.

In the conversations that unfold in this book, I would like to invite you to meet, and engage with, one of God's pieces of broken glass. I have called him simply López, which is his middle name. We know him more commonly as Inigo, who later took the name Ignatius of Loyola.

At the beginning of his story, we meet someone who is vain, ambitious, even arrogant, and certainly of dubious moral standing. As he gradually shares his story, we can see the transformative power of grace in action. The man we might dismiss, or even fear, at the beginning of the story, gradually discloses a history of vulnerability and imperfection. The more the vulnerability is revealed and acknowledged, the more the power of divine light increases, penetrating the brokenness to create the rainbow.

When I was first invited to write this story, I refused, on the grounds that I have no experience in writing biography, let alone hagiography. The publishers were insistent. Over an extended breakfast, with a bottomless coffeepot and a visionary editor, in a

backstreet Chicago café, I was persuaded. Not to write a biography, but to tell a story.

When I first encountered Ignatius, many years earlier, I guess I would have thought of him as someone I would probably not want to meet in heaven: a soldier, a rather legalistic individual with views of the church that would differ widely from my own, and the founder of a religious order that had the reputation of being the papal shock troops in the war against the Protestant Reformation, a war with which I would have had little sympathy. Under the wise guidance of some of his twentieth-century sons, I saw my view of him move rather toward respect, and even reverence, for someone I had to acknowledge as a saint, certainly someone much more complex than I had imagined, someone who had something important to teach us.

By the time I embarked upon the venture of this book, I realized I had developed a certain guarded affection for him. It was this incipient affection and curiosity as to what it was that made him tick that, along with the breakfast and the coffee and the enthusiastic editor, persuaded me to risk setting out on the

journey that these conversations reveal. By the time I came to write the final section, when López leaves for the last time, just as a single star is rising into the night sky, I found myself writing through my tears. I knew then that López had become as much a part of my own life as he had of the narrator's. I think I can honestly say that I have never enjoyed writing a book as much as I have enjoyed this one, or been so deeply moved by any subject as I have been by this. The personal encounter with López has changed me in ways I could never have imagined. My hope is that he will tell you, the reader, his story in ways that might be transformative for you also.

Is this a work of biography or of the imagination? Both, really. The facts about Ignatius's life and person that I have included are biographically accurate. The story of the narrator, as she engages with her unexpected guest, is a work of the imagination. Rachel is not me. Her story is not my story. The interaction between them is God's story, and I hope that, as such, it will speak to *your* story.

Rachel meets López with no preconceived ideas about him. He is a stranger to her, and she does not even share his religious background. Rachel is, perhaps, a postchurch pilgrim, searching for her own deepest truth and struggling with her own life's issues, meeting heart-to-heart with López across the divide of five centuries of history and a huge cultural disconnection. That they relate so deeply with each other across these gulfs is part of the miracle, reflecting the greater miracle that Ignatian spirituality is even more relevant to our world today than it was when he walked the length and breadth of Europe in his pilgrim sandals.

And conversations, of course, were Ignatius's preferred method of engaging with the lives of the people he met. The art of spiritual conversation is one of the most valuable aspects of his legacy to us. The conversation with Rachel would have been, for him, the most natural and obvious "way of proceeding."

Over the course of his life, with all its joys and its despair—its struggles, humiliations, and graces—López is being honed and polished by divine love, from a piece of broken glass into a finely finished prism that

we can hold in our hands today, a prism through which the invisible light of God is bent and refracted into the colors of everyday life—our everyday lives.

Enjoy your pilgrimage as you explore, with him and with God, the colors of your own soul's journey—a journey that invites you to grow from bent and broken to translucent and transformed.

Margaret Silf
February 2012

A Story Begins

I never knew what hit me.

One minute I was cycling, somewhat distractedly, along the familiar streets of my hometown. The next minute I was sprawled on the sidewalk, stunned, my cycle a crumpled heap on the roadside. As to the cause of this disruption to the smooth running of things, all I could see of him were his exhaust fumes as he sped away from the scene, leaving not a trace behind except my demolished cycle and the searing pain in my ankle.

The street was deserted. I lay for a while, wondering how to get home. Then the stranger came up to me.

“Can I help?” he asked. “You seem to have run into trouble.”

I was speechless with gratitude. My anger with the hit-and-run driver dissolved into pure thankfulness that I was no longer alone with my problem. I looked into the face of my rescuer and saw kindly eyes. Right then, that was all I needed to see. I gratefully accepted his offer to see me back to my home. He picked up the wreckage of the bike in one firm movement and with his free hand supported my arm. Together, we hobbled home.

That's when I became aware that he, too, had a limp. One day I would hear the story behind the limp, but right now I rested my weight on his arm and guided him back to my little apartment, a few blocks away.

"When life knocks you sideways," he said, as we walked, "sometimes it's the beginning of something new, something that takes you completely by surprise."

I paused in my unsteady tracks for a moment and gazed at him. Those words seemed to have come straight from his heart. I found myself curious to know him better. I felt that he knew much more about the mystery of things than he was revealing. I wanted to

know what it was that he knew, what dream fired him up, what story underpinned these little glimpses of wisdom he shed upon my plight.

He could not possibly know that my “plight” involved far more than this sudden spill from my bicycle. Or that, at the moment the car struck me, I could hardly see it for all the other scenarios alive in my mind. To say I’d been preoccupied would be an understatement. The accident had merely brought to manifestation the state of my heart that day. No, he couldn’t know this, yet he spoke as if he knew that my story was much bigger, much deeper.

By the time we had walked the half mile or so to where I lived, I felt the spirit of a deeper friendship calling us to walk many more miles together. I invited him in for coffee, knowing that this could be an encounter with unpredictable consequences. And he unhesitatingly accepted my invitation. He came in through my door that day, but he brought with him a story that would gradually coax my own story to life.

“You’re hurt,” he sympathized. But I was already forgetting the pain in my ankle because of the sense of peace I felt in this man’s presence.

“I’ll survive,” I said brightly. *Well, I hope I’ll survive*, I thought, in a darker part of myself.

“You will do more than survive,” he said. “Our hurts can be the places where we start to grow. One day you may look back with gratitude to the reckless driver who knocked you off your bike.”

Who was this stranger, sitting drinking coffee in my home? A short, thin, middle-aged man; not a local man, I felt sure, or I would have recognized him. He looked strangely out of place in the modern world. But there was something timeless in his face.

For a while he sat in silence, but it was a confident kind of silence, as if he were assessing the place and deciding whether he might feel at ease here. I was doing my own assessment, watching his face, noticing the calm surface—the look of self-possession under which, I was sure, lay a story. This man had known turmoil, loss, and disappointment. His life had not

been a walk in the park. The eyes that met mine were sharp, clear, and frighteningly perceptive.

“I know this sounds bizarre,” he said, finally breaking the pregnant silence. “I actually lived more than five hundred years ago. On my five-hundredth birthday, *you* were in midlife yourself, and going through a time of growth and turmoil, were you not?”

For a moment, I was speechless. There had certainly been serious turmoil in my life over the past twenty years or so, and just a couple of months ago, around the time of my fiftieth birthday, I had received a shocking phone call, and with it some new demands upon my life. Not only that, but my work had just recently become quite interesting, and not in a good way.

“Well,” I said with some hesitancy, “I suppose you’ve got the turmoil right. Only time will tell about the growth.”

He smiled. “Now a chance accident has thrown us together. However, I don’t think anything happens by chance.”

“I don’t have any idea who you are,” I said, after a bewildered pause, as I tried to make sense of these revelations. “And yet I feel as if I know you. I don’t even know your name.”

“Just call me López,” he replied. He looked at me, eyes raised in question.

“I’m Rachel,” I said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rachel. But I must go now. And you must rest.”

“I will,” I promised.

A slightly awkward silence ensued before both of us simultaneously began to speak.

“Why don’t you come and visit again,” I began.

“It would be good to continue this conversation,” he said at the exact same moment. We laughed at ourselves.

And so it began.

What follows is the story of how it unfolded.

Milk, Fire, and Roasted Chestnuts

*W*e had agreed to meet again. How we had met in the first place I did not understand—and, to be truthful, I had not quite heard what he said about having lived five hundred years before. The rational part of me insisted that this was a metaphor of some sort, and the rest of me refused to linger on the question. As the day approached, I found myself thinking, off and on, about what might lie ahead. I hadn't expected this stranger with his engaging ways and unfathomed depths to preoccupy my thoughts so much. I didn't really know whether I was looking forward to our coming conversation or wishing I had never agreed to this

crazy proposition to continue a conversation with a man I did not know.

What, I asked myself, did I most want to ask him? In the end, I decided to let him do most of the talking, given that talking to strangers seemed to be absolutely no problem for him, even if they were five hundred years younger and had a very different worldview. Well, we would see how it went. . . .

The doorbell rang, and I let him in, trying not to let my eagerness—or my anxieties—show too much. He shed his coat in my hallway and made a beeline for the chair he had apparently singled out as his location of choice in my home. The awkward silence I had feared never had opportunity to take hold. After inquiring about the state of my ankle, he plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out a little paper bag. Pushing it in my direction, he said, “I brought these. Thought you might like to try them. Hope you like them as much as I do.”

With unconcealed curiosity I delved into the little bag to find four freshly roasted chestnuts, straight from the brazier! My brain seized up, making me incapable

of forming the obvious question: "Where did you get these on a fine sunny evening in the suburbs?"

"This is a special occasion for me," he explained, "a kind of feast day. And it has always been my habit to celebrate feast days by allowing myself this modest treat." His eyes rested on the chestnuts as if they were pure gold. "I'm pleased that we met. I think we have a story to explore together, and I'm glad your ankle is better. Three reasons to celebrate. Now, help yourself, while they are still hot, and I'll tell you how it all began."

He settled back, chestnut in hand. "I was born under a wandering, exciting, adventurous star," he told me. I felt the goose bumps work their way along my arms and neck. "I stumbled into the world at a time of huge transition: the end of the medieval period and the start of the Renaissance. New birth—"

"You really are . . .?" I didn't know how to ask the obvious: *Have you really travelled across time to sit in my living room?*

"The answer is yes," he said, in quite a straightforward way. "It's not important that you understand *how*

I am here but that I *am* here. If I've learned little else about the life of the soul, I do know that appreciating the present moment—whether it's mundane or mysterious—is always the best way to go.”

I made a little jump, then, in my mind and heart. I would just accept what was happening. Oddly enough, once I chose to do that, my thoughts were travelling right alongside López's as he picked up his train of thought. “To be born into a time of new birthing brings a certain responsibility, don't you think? It makes you into something of a midwife.”

I thought about my own times at the start of the twenty-first century, and it wasn't hard to see the similarities. “We are living through that kind of period now,” I suggested. “We're not moving from the medieval to the Renaissance, but the changes are fast and furious, and they leave us breathless—sometimes afraid.”

“Exactly!” he said, with unexpected vigor, as though he had been waiting for me finally to make the connection.

And so, as we indulged in our chestnuts, a story began to unfold that spanned the intervening centuries with no sense of dislocation of either time or place.

“Michelangelo was sixteen years older than I, and Martin Luther eight years older,” he said. “What a pair of big brothers!” He smiled. “And when I was a year old, Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World, under the flag of Spain, of course.”

“And a thousand years after Brendan the Navigator of Ireland made that voyage,” I added under my breath, not wanting to take too much wind out of his proud Spanish sails. He ignored my intervention and went on to describe the ferment of excitement that goes with living through an age of discovery, of pushing known boundaries, of risking the great beyond, of relentlessly searching for “more.”

“And I had a little sister, too,” he said. “Over in Ávila, a little girl called Teresa was born years later. She grew up to make waves in high places! And we are still close.” He smiled warmly. “You would love her.”

“And your birth family?” I was eager to hear more.

“We were a mixed bunch. I was the last shake of the tree—number thirteen—with eight brothers and four sisters.”

“Thirteen,” I mused. “Lucky or unlucky?”

He pondered that for a moment. “Both! Unlucky, because my father died when I was still a teenager, and my mother died when I was very young. In fact, I don’t remember her, and that makes me very sad. And unlucky because, well,” he hesitated. “If I’m honest, I have to admit that we had a pretty dreadful reputation—high beliefs but low standards, you might say. Brawls-on-Saturdays, Mass-on-Sundays, kind of thing. And sometimes worse than brawls. Sometimes serious harm. Not to mention the illegitimate children that have to be counted among our brood.”

That last remark delivered a silent shock to my system, deep down. Could he possibly know there was such a child at the edges of my own life? But I responded, “It sounds a lot like today’s world.” I thought of the volatile mix of unbridled sex and violence alongside the growing longing for spirituality

that mark our times. “And what part of your beginning was lucky?”

His face relaxed, and his eyes began to shine. “Well, leaving aside the obvious good fortune of being born into a landed family when there was so much poverty around, I was so lucky to grow up where I did, and surrounded by good folk such as Maria Garin. Maria was a real mother to me. She was my wet nurse, but that was only the beginning of our relationship. As I grew up, I so loved to go and visit her and her family. They were peasant folk, living in the little village of Eguibar not far from our castle. That was my childhood idyll. I close my eyes now, and I can see the bright blue skies over my Basque homeland, the meadows and mountains, the stream flowing through the valley, and there, nestling at the heart of it, the simplicity and warmth of their very ordinary home. I can feel the closeness of Maria as she held me in her arms and told me stories about the creatures all around us, the woods and the pastures, and our Basque history. They loved me as if I were their natural child.”

The thought of such love being possible made my eyes misty.

“Maria’s husband, Martin de Erratzti, was the local blacksmith, and when I was a child, I loved to stand in the smithy and watch him at work. I delighted in the flames and the sparks, and marveled at how from all the heat and molten metal something hard and durable emerged, something real and solid. He transformed this raw energy into tools that helped people live their lives more fully. I wanted to do that too. He was passionate about his work. I wanted to be that passionate about something.”

He glanced up and saw me looking at him intently. I was pretty certain that he did, eventually, live out the sort of passion he spoke of. Apparently reassured that I was not just listening but entering into his story, he continued, “And that was where the chestnuts came in. Maria gathered them, and Martin roasted them, and together we enjoyed them. And today we celebrate again, you and I, because our souls have connected.”

His reminiscences seemed to fill the room and bring a beautiful sense of peace and gratitude with

them. I felt I was actually there, in that remote valley in the foothills of the Pyrenees, where a little Basque boy first tasted the milk of human kindness, the fire of human passion and creativity—and roasted chestnuts!

Illusion, Disillusion

When you engage in a conversation with the past, I guess you should be ready for whatever comes. What came next time, however, found me seriously unprepared. I had, quite reasonably I thought, come to expect my now almost familiar companion, my under-sized middle-aged gentleman, limping, and dressed in ways that wouldn't attract undue attention. This I could cope with.

The person who crossed my threshold but a week later was something else altogether. I hesitated momentarily between a powerful desire to keep him at a safe distance and an equally strong urge to get him safely inside before the neighbors noticed him. That

this was López was not in doubt; I could see that in his bright eyes and determined brow. But why the flamboyant clothes?

I watched, speechless, as he strutted along my hallway and installed himself in his usual seat. He was decked out in a suit that could have rivaled Joseph's coat of many colors. Tight hosiery and shining boots showed off his short legs, and a wide cape flew open to reveal this feast of color. The cherry on the cake, so to speak, was provided by—get this!—a scarlet cap, topped by a fine flourish of feather waving in the breeze, a dancing complement to his long red-blond, curly hair.

He grinned at me. "I left the arms at the door, as courtesy demands."

And then I noticed the sword and dagger, the breastplate, the mail corselet, and a bow and arrows, neatly stacked inside my front door.

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts. Either this man had indeed materialized from five centuries ago, or he was on his way to a royal wedding. He broke into my astonishment. "If we are going to revisit

my life,” he said, “I thought we should do it properly, so you could get a feel for how it really was.”

Then, “My father wanted me to be a cleric.”

“Really!” My tone betrayed my disbelief immediately.

“Yes,” he went on. “Being the thirteenth child didn’t do much for my options in the career line. He signed me up for the ecclesiastical life when I was very young. I think it was some kind of insurance policy. But fortunately he never took it too seriously.

“Mind you, it came in useful once when I was in trouble with the police in Azpeitia, near our home. My brother (he was the parish priest) and I were often in trouble, womanizing, brawling, and so on, but this time it got serious, and I hightailed it into the bishop’s jurisdiction and claimed what you would have to call ecclesiastical immunity. I sure thanked my old dad that day, for his foresight.”

“Hmm.” My mind was racing. “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

He raised his eyebrows. “How so?”

By way of an answer I pushed across a copy of the latest newspapers. The headlines spelled it out in stark capitals:

SEX SCANDALS COVERED UP BY BISHOPS.

**OFFENDERS MOVED ON UNCHALLENGED TO
SAFE LOCATIONS.**

**PRESERVING INSTITUTION MORE IMPORTANT
THAN CARING FOR VICTIMS.**

He glanced at the papers, first briefly, then with real engagement. He didn't respond. But I noticed that the feather in his cap began to wilt a bit, and the expression on his face deepened from frivolity to concern.

After a short pause while we both reflected on these connections, he resumed his story. "We had a relative in high places, at the court and close to the king, who had once offered to take one of our boys to train as a page. So, number thirteen got the lucky break, and when I was sixteen, I found myself riding south, to the lands of no less a one than Juan Velazquez de Cuellar."

He paused, to see whether this had impressed me, and I noticed his fleeting disappointment. But, undeterred by my lack of enthusiasm, he described how he had embarked on this new stage of his life equipped with little more than a moderate ability to sing and dance and a goodly pedigree. And so, dreaming of fame and glory in the courts of Old Castile, he had bade farewell to family and friends, not least Maria and Martin, and galloped forth into the sunset. I smiled. He was irrepressible.

“And how did it go?” I asked.

“Just great, for quite a while. I learned to speak Castilian, and I quickly picked up the gentler arts of how to behave in court: when to speak and when to be silent, whom to impress and whom to ignore. It was my noviceship for greater things, I hoped, and I gave it my best efforts. I certainly gave Velasquez, and hence the king, my wholehearted loyalty. That was how things were. When the king called, you responded.”

“And were these great men worthy of such wholehearted allegiance, do you think?”

“Nobody would ever have asked such a question,” he answered, rather sharply, as though it were impertinent on my part even to suggest the possibility of doubt.

I stuck to my twenty-first-century guns. “But *now*,” I insisted. “How would you answer the question now?”

“I guess my dreams of glory were something of an illusion,” he admitted. “I have to say that, because suddenly the wind began to blow from a different direction. King Ferdinand died in 1516, and his successor, Charles I, began to put pressure on my employer to give up his lands. Protest was futile. It sobered me up, I can tell you. I realized how uncertain these allegiances are, how they have no real foundation, represent no lasting loyalties. Then Velasquez died, and I was out of a job. I was sent on my way with five hundred escudos and two horses and the suggestion that I should seek out the Duke of Najera. From now on I was going to have to trust my own deeds, my own courage and skill, not the words of others, however high-sounding.”

He fell silent then, no doubt remembering his misplaced trust. I was remembering illusions of my own, of people whose loyalty I had trusted, of work that I loved but that increasingly brought me up against resistance, and questions of allegiance and integrity. Such life lessons stretch across the centuries.

“But every cloud has a silver lining.” Once again his busy eyes sought out mine. “For me this setback opened up the door to a soldier’s career when the Duke of Najera took me on for military training, and perhaps that was closer to what I had always dreamed of. Just look at me! Don’t you think I suit the part? Spain is going from strength to strength, and so am I. My country is not just conquering Europe. We are sending our brave conquistadors to the New World—nothing can stop us now! And I am part of it. One day my name will be remembered as a fine and noble servant of the king, helping to spread his kingdom across the globe. Mark my words.”

And with a flourish he breezed out the door, feather flying high again.

“But which king?” I was left murmuring to his empty chair. “And whose kingdom?”

Shattered

*S*everal weeks passed. I barely noticed, because in spite of recent complications in my work life, I had been very busy that month, and traveling a great deal. When I finally landed at home, a whole new set of flowers had bloomed in my little garden out back.

When López returned, a day or so after I did, it was a very different man who sat crumpled up in my home. I couldn't believe my eyes when he arrived, clearly in pain, and mortified in some deeper way as well.

"For goodness' sake, sit down and rest," I said, gazing at him with real concern. "Whatever happened?"

"My aunt knew," he whispered. "She warned me. She must have seen it coming."

Was he delirious as well as injured? But he went on. “She said to me on one of my visits home, ‘You will never learn or become wise until someone breaks your leg.’”

There was a long silence. It looked as if someone had done exactly that. The agony was written all over his face. And gradually, painfully, the story trickled forth.

The call to arms had come suddenly, when Captain Herrera summoned his senior officers to an emergency meeting. The fort of Pamplona stood in disputed territory between France and Spain in the Kingdom of Navarre that, until the Spanish took it over, had been fiercely independent. For now, the Spanish held it and were seen as an occupying force, but the French were advancing in vastly superior numbers. The loyalty of the local people could not be counted on. The fortifications wouldn’t withstand too much punishment. There was talk of surrender.

López pulled himself up in the chair. “Surrender?” he almost shouted. “Do I look like someone who surrenders?”

Whatever else I might be thinking about my strange guest, the word *surrender* certainly didn't come to mind. This man might be foolish and conceited, but there was something in him that I was beginning genuinely to admire.

"It looks like you stood your ground," I remarked.

"I stood my ground until my legs were shot away from under me," he boasted, flinching even as he uttered the words. "My aunt would have laughed."

"No," I corrected. "Your aunt would have wept."

He glanced at me, almost as though he had never coupled the two ideas of "courage" and "compassion," had never considered that harsh words of warning can be spoken out of tender love.

"What a failure." He sighed, miserably.

"What a transformation," I suggested.

"Transformation?" An eyebrow shot up. "How do you get transformation out of defeat?"

"Well," I said, choosing my words carefully, "I'm thinking of Martin de Erratzti and his blacksmith's fire. Of how that fierce heat and those flashing flames turn raw metal into durable tools, but only when it has been

through the agony of the blacksmith's hammer and the cruel bed of the anvil. I'm thinking you are lying on that cruel bed, right now. Could it possibly be a place of transformation?"

"The only evidence of transformation I was aware of after the cannonball hit me was the transformation from vertical to horizontal," he admitted. "Without warning my world was blown apart. I was used to commanding the situation, being in control, *conquering*. And now the French victors were commanding me, controlling my next move, conquering . . ." he could hardly bear to pronounce the word, ". . . conquering *me!*"

"Is that how it felt?" I encouraged him to keep on exploring this, the greatest trauma life had dealt him so far. Frankly, I was in my element. Helping people tell their stories is what I do for a living.

He gave me a quizzical look, as if to say, "How do you *think* it felt?" But then he became more thoughtful, and he told me how events had unfolded. How he had been left with only minimal medical attention while the ceasefire was negotiated—left to ponder his

situation and gulp the air of defeat. How he had felt mortified by his enforced impotence and enraged by those who had fled the scene, as he saw it. I could imagine this courtly young man and fearless soldier with his fine manners and high hopes, literally biting the dust and choking on the fumes of failure.

“They were decent men, though, the French,” he added. “Warfare in my day wasn’t like it is now. The vanquished enemy was still treated as a human being. The French officers came alongside me where I was—no crowing or gloating. They did their best to help me. And then the final honor, or the ultimate mortification, whichever way you look at it: they carried me home on a stretcher. And that was no easy journey I can tell you, across the rough mountain tracks. It took forever. We had to keep stopping, and I felt every jolt in every bone of my body.”

“Where was ‘home’?” I asked.

“Well, Velasquez was dead, and there was certainly no future in Pamplona after the defenses fell and the French took over. I had no option but to direct them back to the family castle, though I couldn’t imagine

how I would be received there. Actually, my sister-in-law, Magdalena, was there for me, and I am so grateful to her for her gentleness and kindness. She cared for me when I was helpless to care for myself. I guess I would never have discovered that depth of kindness if the cannonball hadn't knocked me out. Her love was 'home' to me. But I despised those wretches who had run away when things got hot in Pamplona!"

Then he became deeply serious and sat for a while in a thoughtful silence.

"You know what?" he said finally. "Until that moment when the cannonball, in one fell swoop, shattered my leg and my ambitions, I didn't realize how I had spent my life walking my own path, and actually walking away from God. I had been the center of my own world. I think that was the moment when I caught a glimpse from a very different angle. When you are flattened in defeat, you get to look up, and, just possibly, you might see God looking down on you."

"Looking down," I repeated.

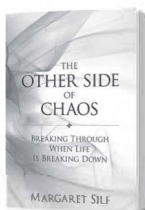
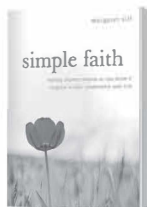
"But looking down with compassion," he added. "I'd never seen that before."

Another long and pregnant silence, then, “Perhaps I’m the one who has been running away all my life. And now I’ve been carried home, helpless.”

Also by Margaret Silf

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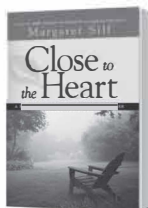
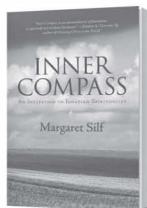


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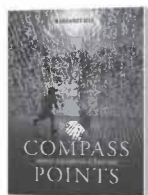


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LOYOLA PRESS.
A JESUIT MINISTRY
www.loyolapress.com
Chicago

ISBN-13: 978-0-8294-3668-6
ISBN-10: 0-8294-3668-5



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