

Spiritual Direction: Waking Up and Recovering Ourselves through Movies

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*I know what you've been doing... why you hardly sleep, why you live alone, and why night after night you sit by your computer. It's the question that drives us. It's the question that brought you here.*¹

The Matrix² and Spiritual Direction

Is there a link between movies and spiritual direction? I believe there is, and to explore my sense of linkage I'd like to reflect on the first instalment³ of the Wachowski brothers'⁴ *Matrix* movie trilogy.



Now, I need to say at the outset, that the *Matrix* is **not** a movie about spiritual direction – far from it! The themes that this essay seeks to highlight in relation to spiritual direction are drawn from a necessarily limited engagement with what I regard as a central metaphor in the movie – the metaphor of *waking up*.

Further, this essay is an attempt to *both* listen to the Christian spiritual direction tradition, and also for the presence of the Spirit (who *directs*) in the midst of contemporary culture.

The *Matrix* is a modern myth, a myth that draws on many religious and non-religious traditions and practices. It weaves together both orthodoxy and non-orthodoxy.⁵

In fact, *The Matrix* offers the possibility of a parable, one that allegorises a process within which a directee increasingly “wakes up,” i.e. becomes wakeful, attentive, and alive to the inner and outer movements of God in their lives. They wake up to the realisation that they are on what Cistercian monk Michael Casey describes as “a journey toward God.”⁶ *It is a journey of becoming increasingly free.*

Jesuit priests, John Pungente and Monty Williams⁷ write, “Each of us, without exception, is trapped in encompassing forms of destruction that distort human freedom and seek to frustrate human desire to love, to be creative, and to create community.” And so it is that Neo too, the movie’s central character, is likewise initially trapped in the de-humanising and illusory construct known as the “Matrix.”

Waking Up

At the beginning of *The Matrix*, a black-clad computer hacker known as Neo falls asleep in front of his computer. A mysterious message appears on the screen: “Wake up, Neo.”

In offering spiritual direction we are inviting the directee to *wake up* to the “real,” to their “True Selves.”⁸ They (and we as directors) wake up to the reality of our having been created to image and relate to God (Gen 1:27, 2:7, 18, 21-23). Through the Spirit’s activity they and we are increasingly *freed* and *enabled* to become more fully human.

British author, Margaret Silf writes in her wonderful book, *Landmarks: An Ignatian Journey* that “in our growth-path toward our deepest and eternal reality, we have to make a radical switch of focus. God challenges us to cease from being ‘self’-centred, that is, in orbit around our own kingdoms, and to become ‘God-centred.’”

¹ Dialogue from the movie, *The Matrix*.

² For more on this trilogy see <http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/>.

³ Released in 1999.

⁴ Andy Wachowski, born December 26, 1967 and Larry Wachowski, born June 21, 1965.

⁵ For example, there is much that draws on Gnosticism.

⁶ Michael Casey, *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer*, Liguori Publications, revised edition, 1996.

⁷ John Pungente SJ and Monty Williams SJ, *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies*, Ottawa: Novalis, 2004.

⁸ See Thomas Merton, *The Guilty Bystander*, and also Patrick W. Collins, *From Illusions Toward Truth: Thomas Merton's 'True Self' and Gay Spirituality*, in *The Way*, July 2005.

So “waking up” (Rom 13:11, Eph. 5:14, & Rev. 3:2-3) has the additional sense of having to do with a radical (though oftentimes very gradual) switch of focus and orientation in ones life.

In his book, *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality & Faith in the Matrix*, Chris Seay writes of “reversals and surprises,” and sleeping becomes a symbol for blindness, for not seeing the “real.” It symbolises a lack of authenticity, disorientation, and disconnection. Neo is initially trapped in a ‘desert’ of the unreal.

Spiritual direction then, is situated within the tension of surprises and reversals, the ‘real’ and the illusory. The directee, like Neo, is becoming free⁹, is being ‘re-born’, is waking up, and is increasingly resisting the allure of the illusory. Perhaps God has planted within them a God-whispered question? Perhaps this ‘question’ is a source of restlessness or discomfort? Perhaps, like Neo, it’s a question that has awoken in them a need for guidance, for help, or for meaning making? Perhaps they have been woken by the dissonance of a divided or incomplete life; a divergence between what Parker J. Palmer calls their “inner” and “outer” worlds,¹⁰ or what *The Matrix* names as the “dream world” and the “real world”?

“...Have you ever had a dream Neo, that you were so sure was real. What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?”¹¹

In the movie, Neo *wakes up* to both the truth of his condition, and increasingly to the truth concerning his identity as “the One.” In wakefulness he explores the vague yet gnawing disquiet that all is not as it appears, or as it should be. So too this is often the experience of the directee.

The Matrix, with its central metaphor of “waking up,” illustrates what Thomas Merton describes as “the difficult ascent from falsity toward truth, [an ascent that] is accomplished not through pleasant advances in wisdom and insight, but through the painful unlayering of levels of falsehood, untruths deeply embedded in our consciousness, lies which cling more tightly than a second skin...”¹²

Margaret Silf, already mentioned, suggests that we delude ourselves when we position ‘self’ at the centre rather than God. “Transformation...happens when we make the earth-shattering, [sleep-ending] discovery...that neither God nor his creation revolves around *us*, but that we and all creation revolve around, and are centred in God.” This is often the first reality that spiritual direction *awakens* us too.¹³



And, as we wake-up, there comes, as Gerald May notes, “a growing ability to risk that God is present, active and welcoming in all situations.”¹⁴

Thus in our waking up we ultimately learn to pray. We learn that prayer in its broadest sense is “everything that touches upon ones relationship with God, including relationships with other people.”¹⁵

In spiritual direction we discover that “no one wakes up once and for all. No one is permanently ‘reorientated.’ There is no limit to wakefulness, just as there is no limit to aliveness.”¹⁶ There is no end to what Walter Brueggemann calls the cycle of “orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.”

So, the thought I want to advance, against the backdrop of this important qualifier – “*It is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God who chooses to awaken us*”¹⁷ – is that *The Matrix* invites spiritual directors to work with and to explore the metaphor of “waking up.” Spiritual direction is, amongst a number of things, an

⁹ Interestingly, St. Ignatius came to see that we all live in imagined constructs of reality. Our experiences, our living, our hopes and dreams, our fears, our pain, and our temperaments etc construct these “worlds” within which we are enclosed and in need of God’s freeing and healing.

¹⁰ See particularly Palmer’s 1999 work, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*.

¹¹ Dialogue from the movie.

¹² Thomas Merton, in Patrick W. Collins, *From Illusions Toward Truth: Thomas Merton’s ‘True Self’ and Gay Spirituality*, in *The Way*, July 2005.

¹³ Yet, John Calvin in his *Institutes* helpfully asserts, “there is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowledge of self, and no deep knowledge of self without a deep knowing of God.”

¹⁴ Gerald G. May, *To Bear the Beams of Love: Contemplation and Personal Growth*, *The Way* 59 (1987), p. 31.

¹⁵ Patrick Purnell, *Spiritual Direction as a Process* in *The Way*, No. 54, Autumn 1985, p.6.

¹⁶ David Steindl-Rast.

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, A New Directions Book, 1972.

accompanying role in which a directee is helped to wake-up, to progressively move from slumber and captivity, to freedom, reality, authenticity, wakefulness, and aliveness in Christ Jesus.¹⁸

Journeying

In both the movie and in spiritual direction we are encouraged, in our moments of wakefulness, to respond to God's wooing, to follow Neo's white rabbit.¹⁹ Like Neo, we are led on a journey of becoming *more* rather than less.

Patrick Purnell S.J. describes spiritual direction as an ongoing series of conversations between the director and the directee that are characterised by "travelling and searching." He writes that spiritual direction is about "seeking the right way, trying different approaches, retracing ones steps from dead ends and finding the right places to make enquiries; and searching, seeking and [enquiring] about the will of God..."²⁰. Neo is both searched *for* and *searching*.

The Matrix and spiritual direction are both concerned with a journey, a search, and in that searching we discover that while we might be primarily searching for the living God, we are also searching for our deepest selves. We have somehow come to the realisation, helped perhaps by Thomas Merton, that little is gained in our "sailing to the moon, if we [have not been] able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves." This, Merton tells us "is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it all the rest are not only useless but disastrous."²¹

The directee wake ups and they begin or continue a journey.

Noticing

Spiritual direction encourages us in our *growing* wakefulness²² to make meaning and to notice. It encourages us to listen for the deeper rhythms, stirrings, longings and desires that lie beneath the surface of what we take to be the reality of our lives and contexts. We learn how to turn these longings and inner movements into what Margaret Silf describes as "the words...the silences of prayer, [and] the adventure of prayer."

Like Neo in the movie we become increasingly aware, but in spiritual direction that awareness focuses on noticing the deep stirrings of the Spirit within us. Spiritual direction helps us notice the interconnectedness and the *inwardness* that lies at the heart of meaning making.²³

We learn and practice what Cistercian monk, William of Saint-Thierry describes as being wholly present to oneself and to the realities of oneself, in order that we might more deeply know *who* and *whose* we are.²⁴

The Matrix, like all well crafted movies, also reminds us that movies often "touch layers of our being that lie deeper than rational thought. They expose us to the heart of God in special ways,"²⁵ particularly in a visual culture such as our own. Movies help us take notice of and actually *feel* moral outrage, fear, sadness, joy, empathy, and anger. In gifting this to us, they help us to explore the deepest meanings of our lives. Spiritual direction thus needs always to be interested in the images, drama, metaphor, symbol, and music that are woven through a directee's life.

The directee wakes up, or continues to wake, and they begin to notice.

¹⁸ This is an important reality that needs to be clearly stated. This is not a "waking up" to what is hidden, in some kind of Gnostic sense. This "waking up" is our increasing responsiveness of God revealed in Jesus Christ and present in the person of the Holy Spirit – "But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." (Eph. 5: 13-15).

¹⁹ I read the "white rabbit" as a metaphor for God as the wooing Spirit.

²⁰ Patrick Purnell, *Spiritual Direction as a Process* in *The Way*, No. 54, Autumn 1985, p.5.

²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, A New Directions Book, 1970, p. 11.

²² Waking up, by way of spiritual direction, is a *process* – a journey. *The Matrix*, being a three-part story, i.e. a trilogy, reinforces this sense of journey. Much work and exploration occurs around the gap between inner realities and external appearance or context; in the case of *The Matrix*, (and often in our own lives) this external appearance is often an illusory context. It represents unreality.

²³ St. Ignatius' *Examen* is a wonderful prayer resource for developing the wakefulness and God-sensitivity that we need as both director and directee. For a very readable introduction see Sue Pickering, *Glimpses of Grace*, in *REFRESH: a Journal of Contemplative Spirituality*, Winter 2005 Vol. 5, No.1, pp. 48-50. www.sgm.org.nz Or see chapter 12 "How to Pray with the Gospels – The Ignatian Way", in John Pritchard's book, *How to Pray: a practical handbook*, London: SPCK, 2002.

²⁴ William of Saint-Thierry, *Exposition of the Song of Songs*, p. 53.

²⁵ Margaret Silf, *On Prayer*, Lion Hudson Plc, 2004.

Love is the End

Ultimately though, this increasing wakefulness, this noticing, and this inner exploration has as its chief end the decision to love and receive love – to love and be loved by God, to love self, and to love and be loved by those significant others in our lives.²⁶ Spiritual direction helps a person grow in love²⁷ such that love increasingly makes its home in the directee.²⁸

And so, finally, our wakefulness and therefore the possibility of our spiritual growth, as articulated by Gerald Mays, “is the developing capacity to be vulnerable to our love for God and one another, and to God’s love for us, so that we might *be* that love for all creation.” Through spiritual direction and the invitations to wakefulness we approach what Mays describes as the “fulfilment of the two great commandments [Luke 10:27] to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbours as ourselves.”²⁹

“...Won’t you be friend of mine to remind me of what is real.”³⁰

²⁶ This is a critical outcome of engaging with Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*. The first annotation, as contemporised by David L. Fleming, S.J, concludes with these words, “[the Exercises] are good...for strengthening and supporting us in the effort to respond ever more faithfully to the love of God.” And again, in the *Foundation: Fact and Practice*, Fleming’s contemporisation recognises as important our “growth as loving persons...everything has the potential for calling forth in us a more loving response to our life forever with God.” Echoing 1 John 3:18 Fleming concludes his contemporary reading with this important reminder, “*love ought to show itself in deeds over and above words.*” David L. Fleming, *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, A Literal Translation & A Contemporary Reading*, St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996, pp. 5 & 27.

We increasingly see this self-less movement in Neo, although we might want to stop short of calling his ultimate selflessness an act of sacrificial love for the sake of others – see *The Matrix: Revolutions*, the final instalment of the series.

²⁷ Interestingly, from an Ignatian perspective, Michael Ivens, it seems to me, makes a useful connection when, in his commentary on *The Spiritual Exercises*, he notes that *the contemplation to attain love* is a paradigm for “the spirituality of finding and loving God in all things which is the lasting outcome of the Exercises” (p. 169). In a very real sense the Spiritual Exercises are a *journey*. Spiritual direction too, is a journey, the purpose of which is a conversion of the heart resulting in a new quality or a new direction in life. It a ‘turning to’ and a ‘turning from.’ Ivens writes, “... ‘turning to’ in the language of the Exercises consists in seeking and finding the will of God, while the correlative ‘turning from’ is the process of getting free from the influence of ‘disordered’ drives and attachments that stifle love and impede integrity of intention.” This same sense of “conversion” can be seen in Neo, the principal character in *The Matrix*. He awakes from illusion to reality and embarks on a journey of self-discovery and vocational discernment.

²⁸ Here I think of lines from *my* First Principle and Foundation: “...*Teach me to take up residence in a life of love, Love, have the run of my house, become at home and mature in me. Teach me to love others so that your love may become complete in me – perfect love! May that other-love not be just words or mere talk, rather let it be real and active. Strengthen me in love to love...*”

²⁹ Gerald G. May, *To Bear the Beams of Love: Contemplation and Personal Growth*, The Way 59 (1987), p. 33.

³⁰ James Blunt, [sound recording] *Back to Bedlam*, Track 6, *Out of My Mind*, Atlantic Recording Corp & WEA International Inc, 2004.