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## *Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Goat-Feathers*

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

I was planning to write to you today about Ignatian spirituality.

I have become fascinated recently by the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the *Spiritual Exercises* that he worked out. This is the same Ignatius who, with a small group of friends, founded the religious order that we now know as the Jesuits.

Ignatius was a dreamer. Yet, he also had an acute self-awareness. He noticed that fantasizing about his own gallantry, whether in war or romance (he lived in medieval Spain) left him feeling flat and disconsolate. Imagining himself in the life of Christ and of the saints, though, gave him new energy and creativity.

Ignatius used these experiences to develop a new direction for his own life. He came up with a set of meditations that enabled him to envision himself as a companion of Jesus and formulated a set of rules that helped him to discern how to live out that vision in practice.

I am interested in the *Spiritual Exercises* because they are grounded in experience and offer a way of living in the world in relation to God. The discipline they teach encourages us to pay attention to what rises up to our conscious minds and to trust that they are prompts from God.

I went to sleep last night anxiously thinking about rules, principles, and sample meditations. I hoped that my mind would organize all of this information in some way that would be useful to you. But, when I woke up this morning, I could only think of two words.

Goat-Feathers.

I have no idea where these words came from or why they fixed themselves so firmly in my imagination.

I remembered that Goat-Feathers was the name of a restaurant that we loved when we used to vacation down on the Gulf Coast of Florida, but I couldn't figure out what that had to do with Ignatian spirituality.

I looked up the restaurant and discovered that name was taken from the title of a short story written by Ellis Parker Butler, "Goat-feathers are the distractions, sidelines, and deflections that take a man's attention from his own business and keep him from getting ahead." Butler contends that he would have been a successful writer on the order of Mark Twain or Scott Fitzgerald if he hadn't been so easily distracted. He spent too much time, he lamented, collecting feathers and "sticking them on his hide to make himself look like the village goat."

The feathers he collected, though, were moments in nature and doing favors for others – just the kinds of experiences that make life meaningful, but don't contribute to worldly success.

So, my project to explain Ignatian spirituality has converted into a warning. Be careful. The last time I tried it I wound up taking on the practice of collecting goat-feathers as my Lenten discipline.

Your affectionate uncle,  
Ames

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