

DAG: SAVIOR OF AIDS ORPHANS: A BIOGRAPHY. By *Joseph R. Novello*. Ashburn, VA: Cefari Communications, 2019, x + 481 pp., \$30.00 hardcover.

DOI: 10.1177/00030651211062576

*This being human is a guest house. Every morning is a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.*

—JALALUDDIN RUMI

The great existential psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger famously pointed out to Freud that therapeutic failure could “only be understood as the result of something which could be called a deficiency of spirit.” Binswanger was surprised when Freud agreed, asserting, “Yes, spirit is everything” (Binswanger 1963, p. 1).

The life of Angelo D’Agostino S.J., M.D. illustrates both Freud’s assertion and the sentiment expressed by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi that “this being human is a guest house.” The soulful life of Fr. Dag, as he liked to be called, unites Freud and the poet. Dag was a man who followed his heart and was open to what is most meaningful in life. Like a song with a powerful beat, he implores psychoanalysts and the faithful alike to be authentically human. Roll with your soul and remove what gets in the way to connect deeply first to God, then to self, and finally to others.

Joseph Novello’s biography, *Dag: Savior of AIDS Orphans*, was published in 2019, just months before the world went dark with COVID and lit up with social and political upheaval that shifted every day. This pandemic and social unrest was not the first time Americans experienced hardship. The entire era in which Dag lived (1926 to 2006) was marked by immigration challenges, social unrest, wars, and another worldwide virus, called AIDS.

Dag’s life journey challenges the reader to think deeply about what it means to be human yet have a divine spark. Dag explored the essence of the human and the divine in his own personal analysis. After becoming a

surgeon, he was told by his Jesuit superiors that their community did not really need another surgeon. Although he longed to pursue his medical career, his superiors in the order had a different vision of how this talented man could serve humanity. They wanted him to become a psychoanalyst.

During the period 1959–1964 Dag, while a Jesuit-in-training, became the first member of the Catholic religious order to be accepted for training in psychoanalysis. Jesuits see God in all things and in all people, regardless of skin color, social, political, or economic status, or religious affiliation. In an interview with Dag, Gregory Zilborg, a New York psychoanalyst, asked, “Do you want to be a psychoanalytic Jesuit or a Jesuitical psychoanalyst?” (p. 88). The interview led Dag to Dan Jaffe, a classically trained analyst at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute who was known as the “the Jesuit of the Institute” (p. 91). Dag’s analysis and two years of psychoanalytic study deepened and “sharpened his religious beliefs and appreciation for his family and heritage” (p. 99). Dag grew to respect the power of the unconscious and integrated the religious beliefs that shaped his development. The analysis increased his desire to commit to the eleven years of additional training to become a Jesuit priest and serve the mental health needs of the Washington area in clinical practice.

The Jesuits, founded in 1540 by St. Ignatius of Loyola, are known as “contemplatives in action” (Meissner 1992, p. 279). They view the world as their monastery, finding God everywhere, in all things, in all people, devoting themselves not only to the Glory of God, but also to the common good. Similarly, the psychoanalytic relationship provides the holding, containing function of being analyzed that provides a “spiritual function” (Symington 1994, p. 47).

Novello’s biography of Dag beautifully illustrates the complexity of his subject’s mind. As a young man he was engaged to be married, but while his fiancée delayed the marriage to care for her father, it was Dag who ended the relationship—she could not contain him. Nor, after two years of analysis and psychoanalytic training, could theory and analytic practice contain him. Ultimately he grew restless and bored in his clinical work. What he yearned for was to use his training to follow in the true spirit of St. Ignatius. He defied his superiors and followed his own spirit into Africa, despite their warning that at the age of sixty-two his health might well be compromised.

Dag’s circuitous pathway to Africa began with a serendipitous encounter in the Bangkok airport on August 6, 1981. Bored with treating

wealthy Washingtonians, Dag had rebelled against his religious community. At the airport that day, he met a famous Jesuit missionary who in 1965 had become the order's Father General. Pedro Arrupe S.J. was widely known for his 1975 mission statement, "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice," and for promoting individual responsibility and rejecting authoritarian attitudes within the church hierarchy. The Father General unknowingly answered Dag's silent prayer of restlessness in Washington when Pedro said,

"Fr. Agostino, I need your help. I need you to do something for me."

"What Pedro?"

"Base yourself in Nairobi, Kenya."

"Who will I go to, in Kenya?"

"That's just it. There is no one to see. You will have to figure it out as you proceed [p. 143]."

Dag left the airport to go back to Washington and gather his things: he was going to Kenya. Pedro returned to Rome, where upon his arrival he suffered a massive stroke.

Dag's capacity to devote himself to the heartrending work of caring for AIDS orphans in Africa had taken shape in his early upbringing. During his Rhode Island childhood, Dag's Roman Catholic parents played a significant role in the development of his spiritual pathway. His father was an immigrant from Canosa di Puglia, Italy; his mother was brought to America as a child from the same southern region. These immigrants brought with them to America both their religious and spiritual faith and their deep desire to do good.

Giulia, Dag's mother, taught her six children how to pray. She read to them in Italian about the lives of the saints, she taught them respect for the mystery of their faith in the silent adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and as a family they attended Mass together in community. She made extra money sewing. Dag's father, Luigi, worked multiple jobs in construction to provide for the family. Luigi was penniless when he came from Italy in search of his own father, Dag's grandfather, who ultimately rejected his son. This intergenerational trauma filtered down to Dag for a time, when Dag announced to his father his intention to train as a Jesuit. There were already two other siblings in formal religious life, and Dag's father protested his son's vocation fiercely, as Novello describes:

“This cannot be. I won’t have this. I paid for that medical school. No more priests in this family. You are the doctor.” Raging he shouted: “Get out. Get out.,I don’t want to see you anymore!” [pp. 62–63].

Dag was born into a family of strong shared values, hard work, faith, religion, and most of all love for each other in the community, but for three years following that altercation, Dag and his father did not speak.

Dag was named “Angelo” by his spiritually centered mother, who viewed his birth, seven years after her last child, as something of a miracle. This narrative became a major force in Angelo’s life, one which raises the question, what impact does a spiritually centered family have on the development of a child—perhaps a question rarely asked in analytic circles. Historically, spirituality has been dropped from mainstream psychoanalytic theory and practice. However, as Novello’s biography of Dag suggests, only by integrating an authentically religious perspective with the hard emotional work of resolving internal conflicts can psychoanalysis become a holistic theory of the mind. People need multiple perspectives to understand their suffering and to cope in the world, with or without a pandemic.

Freud’s advice about choosing a career direction involves distinguishing between a “job,” a “career,” and a “calling” or, as Catholics say, a “vocation” (Marcus 2021, p. 70). As Freud saw it, a “job” is a practical means to a financial end, while a “career” is a way some people advance themselves in terms of status, prestige, power, and sense of competency, often viewing the work they do as distinct from the rest of their life. A “vocation” or “calling,” by contrast, is regarded as deeply satisfying and socially beneficial, something one feels drawn to pursue and is embraced as a central part of one’s identity.

Only when Dag arrived in Africa and gazed into the hungry eyes of the abandoned children he found there did he truly see the face of God. The children he saw in the streets were suffering from a little-known virus that was killing them. His heart responded, his restlessness subsided, and in a moment he knew his purpose. He contacted his friend, Dr. Anthony Fauci, seeking help with the devastation wrought by this virus, about which very little was known in the 1980s—a virus we now call HIV-AIDS. He brought to bear all his life experience up to that moment—love of family, his surgical skills and Washington connections, his spiritual beliefs, and his own true grit.

Reading about Dag's life brought to mind our present-day viral crisis. The pandemic era of 2020, filled with political and social upheaval, broke open the cracks and crevices within human nature. It opened up a space to crystalize and transform these gems of knowledge that can be mined from deep personal reflection. Often I felt bombarded and overstimulated by the twenty-four-hour news channels reporting journalistic opinions, often shallow, deprived of the mystery of faith and hope in a deepening of society's awareness of the poor and marginalized races right here in America. This has been an opportunity, as St. Cyprian in his treatise "On Mortality" (A.D. 250–266) declared, to "stand erect amidst the ruins of the human race and embrace the gift of the occasion" (paragraph 14).

Dag writes, "we are humans, not angels" (p. 153). Grounded in humanity, Dag's tenacious spirit raises existential questions for me: How are we meant to live? What can we hope to accomplish with our own unique specific thumbprint? What is worth valuing, when some people have everything, and others have nothing?

Listening to one's own heart takes silence, time, and discipline to receive from within the interior world. Psychoanalysts specialize in listening to where the development of a person gets thwarted; Jesuit training nurtures the belief that each person is born with an unencumbered spirit within. Psychoanalysts call this spirit psyche, theologians call it the soul, Jung called it the seat of the unconscious, Hindu masters call it Atman, Buddhists call it Dharma, Rilke calls it inwardness, Sufi's call it Qalb, and Jesus, whom Dag followed in the tradition of St. Ignatius, called it the center of love.

Dag's story reveals the ongoing tension between mind, body, and spirit. He was bright, aggressive, and would not take no for an answer, yet was submissive to his inner self, while his ailing body suffered with lupus, chronic low back pain, hypertension, pulmonary emphysema, mild obesity, and chronic exposure to the HIV/AIDS virus. Dag's attitude throughout his life echoes, the ending of Rumi's poem that stands as my epigraph: "Be grateful for whoever comes because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."


Dag passed away in his adopted country of Kenya in 2006 and was given a state funeral. He is being considered for canonization, supported by his fellow Jesuit, Pope Francis.

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