

# Lent and Asceticism: Does Sacrifice Sanctify?

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I'm going to start off today describing two places in this talk that I would be tickled to discover that others here this morning have visited. The first is the small burg of Richmond, Iowa, which is about twenty miles south of Iowa City and sits on rolling hills above the English River Valley. It is a small town in a region that, upon reflection, almost necessitates religious questioning. The community is made up of Bohemian Catholics (as my Mom always described them), Quakers, Protestants of numerous denominations, Mennonites, and Amish in their horse-powered buggies. This religious pluralism certainly made me question any fundamentalism that would exclude large numbers of our community and in this I can sense the seeds of my ecumenical beliefs.

My Mom hung out with some “rowdy” Mennonite (not an oxymoron) brothers who had just returned from the exotic locales of their mission trips—Africa, New Guinea, India—places I only knew from my atlas. The three of them lived as bachelors in a big farmhouse that they and their friends referred to as “The Monastery.” During one visit, I borrowed a chunk of coal from their pile to take to show-and-tell at school that week, and my Mom coached me several times that I was not to say that it came from “The Monastery.” We were already pretty edgy for this community; my Mom was one of two divorced, single-parent mothers back then and pushed things enough in her job as Home Ec teacher at the local high school. There was quite a bit for me to ponder in this otherwise homogenous Iowa community. I was first exposed to Lent when I would tag

along with my cousins to Catechism Class on Wednesday evenings at Holy Trinity in Richmond. What I remember most were the hard-hitting games of (the very un-PC) “smear the queer” out on the lawn during Catechism recess, but I also remember the twisted jealousy I felt each mid-winter when my Catholic cousins would start talking about what they were giving up that year for Lent. I didn’t have the first clue about what Lent meant back then, but I had the feeling that because my cousin Todd was giving up soda pop and his older brother Tim sacrificing all chocolate for six weeks, they were somehow tougher, holier, worthier than me...

The second place that I’m going to mention is a small, incredibly rugged island 8 miles off the southwest coast of Ireland called Skellig Michael; there are a few photos on this morning’s program. Back in the sixth and seventh centuries, during the height of Christian asceticism, a handful of monks decided that sequestering themselves in stone beehive huts, on a rocky bench near the top of this pinnacle would through simplicity and suffering bring them closer to God. Nisan and I made a pilgrimage to the island during our honeymoon tour of monastic sites in 2004. It was a remarkable feeling to leap off the boat onto thankfully non-heaving land after a rough passage out, and then to scramble up and around the island following in the footsteps of these devout ancestors who must’ve suffered innumerable trials just surviving. We were there on a sunny summer day, but can you imagine what a cold, wet, windy winter day must’ve been like with a North Atlantic storm raging. And not just a day, an entire season, when no one could’ve come or gone from the island—no escape, no help, no resupply. It filled me with a familiar feeling that

by proving themselves in this way, they like my cousins were made holy by their sacrifice.

The impetus for this talk is the approach of Lent in a couple weeks and by my desire to explore (perhaps not answer) the question these two experiences leave me with: Does sacrifice sanctify? For the past ten years or so I have given something up for Lent, but after preparing for this talk today I realize that my understanding of what Lent is all about has been marginal at best. I like the ritual aspect of making a seasonal sacrifice. I like that it comes after an extended holiday period of over-indulgence in our culture. I really like that it mirrors the sacrifices our Northern hemisphere ancestors likely made when they were more dependent on localized agriculture, during a time of year when stores from summer and fall harvests were likely wearing thin. I like that the sacrifices I've made have helped me drop a few winter pounds in time for spring or temporarily break my coffee addiction. I like all these aspects, but have they furthered my spiritual development? Not so much.

The forty days of Lent from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday (Sundays don't count) are really a preparation for Holy Week, Easter, the Resurrection. Forty is one of those numbers in the Bible that gains weight through repetition. Moses endured forty days trial on a mountaintop; Elijah's was in the desert It rained for forty days and forty nights during the Flood; the Jews wandered for forty years after fleeing Egypt; and perhaps most significantly, Jesus retreated to the wilderness for forty days at the command of the Holy Spirit to be tempted and tested.

Lent, or “Holy Spring,” gives Christians an opportunity to identify with Jesus, and through small sacrifices, symbolically walk with him as he nears his ultimate sacrifice. Lent is also a time for the church to prepare, a time for new converts to learn doctrine, but mostly a time for individual recommitment to justice. Yes, justice.? There are three components to individual Lenten observances. The first is what I remember from childhood—the ritualized fasting of giving something up. This is a commitment to justice towards oneself. The second component is an increased devotion to prayer, and that reflects justice towards God. The third component is almsgiving, or justice towards our neighbor. So, it’s really a trinity of actions that Lent demands, and it makes me wonder if it’s a narcissism within myself and our culture that has focused so much on the fasting aspect of Lent, justice towards oneself, and ignored the other two aspects... Is it because denying ourselves some luxury for forty days is easier than taking the time for daily prayer or giving to those in need?

Simple living has been emphasized long before Thoreau went to Walden Pond, and a simplified lifestyle is now much in vogue. I know that for many this is felt as an environmental obligation, that through reducing our consumptiveness we can reduce or delay ecological crises that are rapidly becoming apparent. But I can’t help but think that an even greater impetus behind simplification is that we’ve realized that the material in our lives has crowded out something far more valuable to most of us—the spiritual. I say most of us because if one’s basic material needs are not met, the spiritual has little currency.

Asceticism is the belief that by denying the body and renouncing material comforts, the soul is released from bondage to the body and thereby allowed union with the Divine. For the Greeks, Asceticism meant a practice or training, and it wasn't all pleasures that were eliminated, it was those material pleasures that *distracted* from the pursuit of that particular practice. Lent is a time of spiritual practice and commitment to justice. Justice, symbolized by scales, is in essence a balancing. The three-fold Lenten path is a rebalancing that promotes spiritual growth, the idea that we don't let material concerns be they excess of or lack of impede spiritual growth. By fasting or sacrifice, we reduce a distraction from our own spiritual growth and by almsgiving, we hopefully allow those whose spiritual growth is impeded by a lack of the material, the same opportunity for spiritual growth. It is social justice and voluntary wealth distribution from a spiritual imperative. The third practice of increased prayer allows us the quiet moments to escape "the outer din [and] intently listen for that voice within" as our earlier hymn suggests.

As Unitarian Universalists, we often look to other traditions to find commonalities that bolster our faith. Ascetic traditions and rituals can be found in most world religions. So it would seem that at least the *belief* that sacrifice sanctifies is fairly universal.

Asceticism is not without its downsides. There is a paradoxical danger of renouncing for renouncing's sake, kind of like conforming to non-conformity. And just as there is a universal tradition that emphasizes the necessity of self-control for the sake of spiritual development, there is a storied history of asceticism taken to the extreme. The

Flagellates of medieval Christianity mortified themselves in myriad creative ways; some Hindu Brahmin subscribed to the Laws of Manu which decreed that: “In summer [the Brahmin] expose himself to the heat of five fires, during the rainy season, let him live under the open sky; and in winter be dressed in wet clothes, thus great increasing the rigour of his austerities.” Asceticism taken this far perhaps suffers from the mistaken belief that the greater the austerity, the greater the holiness.

There could certainly be a critique of the inherent dualistic thinking of asceticism that separates soul and body, and encourages repression of the body for the sake of the soul. Also, an asceticism that promotes the nobility of suffering could lead to a passive response in the face of injustice and to unnecessary martyrdom in our societies, jobs, or relationships. I can't help but think of the long-suffering Giving Tree here.

As Unitarian Universalists we are also inclined to discover spiritual truths on our own, and I'll leave you with a few questions. In your own life is there a correlation between sacrifice and sanctity? Do you find that your spiritual life grows richer as your material life is de-emphasized? The Greeks emphasized an asceticism seeking to do away with that which distracts us. What do you find distracting to your own spiritual life? Would anyone else be inclined to try and give up a negative emotional state? Perhaps along with ice cream, strive to give up stress, anger, or worry?