



THE FASCINATION WITH LENT IN A SECULAR WORLD

Ash Wednesday was two days ago. Several years back, members of the Episcopal Community decided to go to street corners and perform the simple ritual of tracing a cross of ashes on the forehead of anyone who wanted it. A funny thing happened to one Deacon who was standing on the sidewalk with a pot of ashes in her hand. She said she had a lot of people come up to her on their way to work. But she got the impression that most of them would not have identified themselves as Christian. Even though they may have been uncomfortable with the religious dogma they appreciated the ritual.



“Lent” comes from an Old German word meaning “the lengthening of the days,” and gradually morphed into a term for springtime. It has a lot of different meanings for the Christians who observe it. The BBC tried to find a common thread and came up with this, *A season of reflection and preparation before the celebrations of Easter. By observing the 40 days of Lent, Christians replicate Jesus’ withdrawal into the desert for 40 days.*

Gradually I think Lent became a time for simplifying our lives. And the need for that jumps over the walls of any religious denomination.

I particularly like the approach of a writer who self-identifies as a “Jewish atheist.” I get the feeling that she was in a school with a number of Catholics years ago. From personal experience I know that kids were always asking each other what they were going to give up for Lent. And this Jewish student probably just got right in there and she writes she has continued to simplify her life at this time of year ever since!

There are others who forget about the “giving up” part and do something extra either by way of self-improvement or making our culture and our world a little better. Frequently I've heard about setting aside a short time in the morning to meditate, reading a poem, writing a letter to someone ill, or in some other way to starting the day on what I would consider a spiritual plane.



What I hear most about “giving up” has to do with unplugging partially or totally from the Internet. Some of this has to do with Lent. Much of it does not.

There is a growing feeling that the Internet is taking over our lives. We walk into a restaurant and see that all the people at a table are on their cell phones and there is little or no conversation between the people. It's rather sobering to hear that many who work in Silicon Valley allow their children very limited time on digital devices of any kind. Having developed this technology these parents understand the possibilities of its negative impacts.



Some people connect their professional or business lives to contacts over the Internet. They can't let that go completely. But they can limit it. Some time ago one of our friends came up with the idea of “Walden Baskets”. The reference was to Henry David Thoreau's (1817–1862) Walden Pond. The idea was that when you had a meal, or a meeting with friends for conversation, or were listening to music, you would place your cell phone in the basket and pick it up as you left. At Starcross we were doing this and for some reason stopped. I think we ought to do it again.

For some people the first internet program to be eliminated from their lives is Facebook. Why? Because, as one of my friends put it, “Once I open it, it is hard to get out of it!” Another friend simply said, “It's exhausting!”

One of the young people here said something that really hit me personally. She said, “You really don't need to know what's going on everywhere in the world at every moment!” I am a real news hound. I act as though if I don't know what is happening all over the world, the planet will somehow fall apart! I'm always tailoring my preferences on the BBC. I checked and found that I had requested



news from some 17 nations! I intend to do something about this — but it is not going to be easy.

So why bother to step back from the Internet? Because it often stands between us and the actual people and growing things that we ought to be more mindful of.

Am I going to be able to end the day without knowing what's happening all over the world, and instead listening to the sounds of the wind, frogs singing, a

cat purring and thoughts of people I love? Well, I'm going to give it a try.



When the rainy season hits in parts of Asia many Buddhist monks retire inside for meditation, reflection, and spiritual growth. Westerners sometimes refer to this as “Buddhist Lent.” When the rain lets up and the monks come out again, they are very watchful not to destroy any new life. This means being especially aware of little sprouts and buds. So they walk with great care and mindfulness of what is around them.

Parts of Northern California have gone through an incredible season of rain, surpassing everything that most people have ever experienced. The winds were high, the rain was heavy and constant, the rivers were flooding badly, and the emotional mood was very gloomy. When it finally stopped, like the Buddhist monks, we became very aware of the new life breaking through the earth and on the trees. There was a respect that came naturally and an awareness of the life we share with other living things on this planet.



It seemed to me there was also a greater care that neighbors had for each other. There was a lot of contacting people to make sure they were all right especially when the roads were flooded. Starcross is high enough to have escaped the floods but we were completely cut off, which raised the concern of friends about what we would do if there was some emergency. This weather is probably the new normal, brought about by climate change.

Today the sun is trying to peek through the clouds and anyone outside here, like the Buddhist monks, is being careful where they put their feet.



I feel like this reflection on Lent should not conclude without some space given to the people who've kept the tradition going over the centuries. In 2015 Pope Francis (1936–) wrote an Encyclical Letter entitled *LAUDATO SI' / On Care For Our Common Home*. One of my young friends said she read it in an Environmental Studies class. But in general it wasn't very popular among American Catholics. One poll said that only 25% of them ever heard it mentioned in church.

In his recent Lenten message, Pope Francis makes reference to the Encyclical and urges people to move beyond pietistic practices, embrace a Lenten concern for our common home, and “Through prayer, contemplation and art, also include other creatures” and

beings that are co-inhabitants of this planet.

It seems appropriate to end with part of *A Prayer For Our Earth* which Pope Francis composed and attached to *LAUDATO SI'*,

*Fill us with peace, that we may live
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this
earth,
so precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives,
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts
of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognize that we are profoundly united
with every creature.*



Have a good Lent — whatever your spiritual path.

Brother Toby