

fLunking sainthood

A Year of Breaking the Sabbath,
Forgetting to Pray,
and Still Loving My Neighbor

A D V A N C E P R A I S E

"So many books make the history and practice of Christian spirituality dreadfully boring through their earnestness, but Jana Riess brought a smile to my face on page one! *Flunking Sainthood* is a witty memoir of a year of failing—and therefore, paradoxically, succeeding—at putting Jesus first. Would that we all failed so well."

—Tony Jones, author of *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*

"Who would have guessed that trying and failing at the spiritual disciplines is way better than not trying at all? And—here's the real surprise: it may even be better than trying and feeling like a success. *Flunking Sainthood* guides you into the human side of the spiritual life with good humor and a bathtub full of grace."

—Brian McLaren, author of *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words*

"Warm, light-hearted, and laugh-out-loud funny, Jana Riess may indeed have flunked sainthood, but this memoir assures us that she is utterly and deeply human, and that is something even more wonderful. Honest and sincere, she will endear you from page one."

—Donna Freitas, author of *The Possibilities of Sainthood*

"*Flunking Sainthood* allows those of us who have attempted new spiritual practices, and failed, to breathe a great sigh of relief and to laugh out loud. Jana Riess's exposé of her year-long and less-than-successful attempts at eleven classic spiritual practices entertains and educates us with its honesty and down-to-earthiness. She writes in the unfiltered, uncensored way I'd write if I had the skill and the guts."

—Sybil MacBeth, author of *Praying in Color*

"Jana Riess's new book is a delight—fun, funny, engaging and a powerful reminder that the greatest work in our lives is not what we'll do for God but what God is doing in us."

—Margaret Feinberg, author of *Scouting the Divine* and *Hungry for God*

"Jana Riess proves to be a standup historian well-practiced in the art of oddly revivifying self-deprecation. This book is freaking wonderful—a candid and committed tale that resists supersizing and spirituality that has no home save the glory and muck of the everyday."

—David Dark, author of *The Sacredness of Questioning Everything*

JANA RIESS

fLunking sainthood

A Year of Breaking the Sabbath,
Forgetting to Pray,
and Still Loving My Neighbor



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray, and Still Loving My Neighbor

2011 First printing

Copyright © 2011 by Jana Riess

ISBN 978-1-55725-660-7

Unless otherwise designated, Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the Authorized King James Version of the Holy Bible.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Riess, Jana.

Flunking sainthood : a year of breaking the Sabbath, forgetting to pray, and still loving my neighbor / Jana Riess.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-1-55725-660-7 (paper back)

1. Spiritual life—Christianity. 2. Perfection—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Failure (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Success—Religious aspects—Christianity. 5. Riess, Jana. 6. Spiritual biography. I. Title.

BV4501.3.R537 2011

248.4—dc23

2011022595

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Paraclete Press
Brewster, Massachusetts
www.paracletepress.com


Printed in the United States of America

FOR PHIL

my resident saint

AND FOR PAPA

who is such a blessing to us



Many people genuinely do not want to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings.

— GEORGE ORWELL

contents

behind the scenes		ix
1		
January	choosing practices	1
2		
February	fasting in the desert	9
3		
March	meeting Jesus in the kitchen . . . or not	25
4		
April	lectio divination	39
5		
May	nixing shoppertainment	53
6		
June	Centering Prayer er, The Jesus Prayer Look! a squirrel!	65
7		
July	unorthodox sabbath	81
8		
August	thanksgiving every day	98

9		
September	benedictine hospitality	113
10		
October	what would Jesus eat?	129
11		
November	seven five three times a day will I praise you	141
12		
December	generosity	153
Epilogue	practice makes imperfect	166
Notes		173
A note to readers		180

behind the scenes

My mom is the sort of person who always wants to know how a book ends before committing to it. It's one of the only things I dislike about her, but she's part of a whole cadre of like-minded readers who furtively skip to the end of a book to spill its secrets before they make an emotional investment.

So for Mom, and for her silent but guilty compatriots, here is the spoiler: I am going to fail at every single spiritual practice I undertake in this book.

I didn't set out to write a book about spiritual failure. This project originated as a lighthearted effort to read spiritual classics while attempting a year of faith-related disciplines like fasting, Sabbath keeping, chanting, and the Jesus Prayer. It culminated in a year-end meeting with my editor, Lil Copan, in which I tried to steel her for the fact that I had fallen short in every single spiritual practice I'd tried. I felt dejected—what kind of loser fails at the Jesus Prayer? I mean, it's twelve words long and takes about four seconds to recite. Lil helped me see the value in a different kind of book, one about the wild acceptability of failure itself. She suggested the title *Flunking Sainthood*. I'm grateful to her for careful editing, challenging feedback, and broad vision. (Even as I write that sentence, I hear her voice in my head, telling me I've used excessive adjectives.) I'm grateful also to Jon Sweeney, Carol Showalter, Pamela Jordan, Sister Mercy, Jenny Lynch, and all the good people at Paraclete Press, a bright spot on the landscape of publishing.

I owe thanks to Beliefnet.com for helping me find my tribe of failed saints through the “Flunking Sainthood” blog, and to the many folks I’ve talked to at Emergent gatherings who connected immediately with the idea of finding the joy in failure. Jonathan Merkh provided invaluable help with my book contract, and many people recommended books to me, including Cynthia Eller, Bob Fryling, and Jeanette Thomason. Jamie Noyd and Leighton Connor, members of my writing group, offered invaluable feedback on drafts, and the sisters at the Community of Jesus spoiled me with exceptional food and hospitality while I was on my writing retreat. My family deserves a medal for graciously loving me through another book.

This book arose out of conversations with many generous friends and acquaintances, some of whom you’ll meet on these pages, but especially Dawn and Andrew Burnett, Claudia Mair Burney, Rudy Faust, Donna Freitas, Nancy Hopkins-Greene, Asma Hasan, Kelly Hughes, Ron and Debra Rienstra, Scot McKnight, Lauren Winner, and Vinita Hampton Wright.

My December practice of generosity would not have been possible without the financial contributions of Christopher Bigelow, Samuel Brown, Alethea Teh Busken, Stephen Carter, Lil Copan, David Dobson, Sheryl Fullerton, Kathryn Helters, Myra Rubiera Hinote, Kelly Hughes, Donna Kehoe, Mark Kerr, Linda Hoffman Kimball, Tania Rands Lyon, Sheri Malman, Preston McConkie, Don McKim, Jana Muntsinger, Marcia Z. Nelson, Kerry Ulm Ose, Tina Hebbard Owen, Vince Patton, Charles Randall Paul, Bernadette Price, Jana Bouck Remy, John Nakamura Remy, Phyllis Riess, Carol Showalter, Kristen Mueller Smith, Megan Moore Smith, Rory Swenson, Hargis Thomas, and Debbie Wilson Waggoner.

I hope I haven’t forgotten anyone, but this is a book about screwing up, so I give myself a pass.

choosing practices

*You see that I am a very little soul
who can offer to God only very little things.*

—ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

My friend Kelly went through a phase when she was about seven years old when she wanted quite desperately to be a nun. In the flush of religiosity attending her First Communion, she pictured herself in a sweeping black habit like the sisters who taught at her strict elementary school. Actually, I just made that last part up. Kelly was a kid after Vatican II, so the nuns probably wore jeans with holes at the knees and chain-smoked in the teachers' lounge. I'll have to ask her sometime. But the *Sound of Music* image makes for a better story.

I didn't grow up Catholic, or any other religion for that matter. My dad was an angry atheist who considered religion a crutch for people who were too stupid to know any better. My mom was considerably more charitable but no more interested in organized religion than she was in volunteering for a Stalinist gulag. So it's hard to explain why I was always drawn inexorably toward religion and religious people.

As a child, I looked forward to spending a Saturday night at my friend Gretchen's house not only for the thrill of staying up past midnight but also because, no matter what time we nodded off, we had to wake up early on Sunday to attend services at her downtown

Lutheran church. I loved dressing up in different clothes on Sunday, sneaking multiple donuts during the coffee klatch, and learning Bible stories on flannel board. This innate religiosity followed me through childhood. Even when I was away from home for two weeks each summer at Girl Scout camp, I'd attend both the Saturday evening Catholic Mass and the Sunday morning Protestant worship. At home, I talked several times to the friendly, guitar-playing Reform Jewish rabbi at my friend Sara's synagogue. At ten, it seemed a good idea to keep all my options open.

But for twenty-five years now I've been a Christian, having sealed the deal with Jesus at a snowy winter youth group retreat during my freshman year of high school. In tears, freezing my ass off on a rock, I stared up at the stars and talked out loud to God like a crazy person. A peace washed over me when I knew God had marked me as *his* crazy person. That was it. I was no longer an outsider looking in on God's family; I had a place at the table. I just didn't know then that it would be impossible to maintain the same passion for God I felt at that singular moment.

I feel little romance for religion anymore. I don't yearn for quiet time alone with Jesus or think about him every hour. These days, Jesus and I are like old marrieds—sometimes I'm a nag, and sometimes he is emotionally distant. Maybe the extremes I'm contemplating with a year of bizarre faith practices are the spiritual equivalent of greeting Jesus at the door wrapped only in cellophane. I'm trying to pop a little zing back into our relationship.

I should backtrack and explain. I am about to embark on an adventure. At the suggestion of some publisher friends, I am conducting a year-long experiment into reading the spiritual classics. Although reading was the extent of their original idea, I immediately upped the ante to include a corresponding monthly spiritual practice to supplement the reading. I guess I am an overachiever.

But which practices? And which spiritual classics? Everyone, it seems, has an opinion. My girlfriend Donna tells me that she absolutely will not be my friend anymore if I don't spend at least one month reading Augustine. Since she's Catholic, she pronounces this August-*een*, and since she's the brainy by-product of about a kajillion years of Catholic education, she has strong opinions about his books. "Read *The Confessions!*" she exclaims. "No, read *City of God!* That's a really good one, and it's so neglected."

I'm not that interested in *City of God*, preferring more personal tales I can relate to. I decide to start with Thérèse of Lisieux, having bypassed Augustine in the hopes that Donna was speaking in the passion of the moment and will still be my friend even if I ignore the guy from Hippo. I spend much of January reading Thérèse's memoir, *The Story of a Soul*. The nineteenth-century French saint Thérèse is famous for bringing saintly wisdom down to the level of the hoi polloi, for calling herself the least of the saints—just an uncultivated "Little Flower" among all of God's gorgeous roses. I figure I can relate.

It doesn't go quite as planned, however. Instead of being the perfect kickoff to my year of trying to be a saint, the book makes me want to strangle the Little Flower. I'm puzzled by why so many people love Thérèse. In her memoir she calls herself "very expansive," which is one of the great understatements of hagiography. In our day we might use different words: *drama queen*. Thérèse decided at an early age that she was going to be a nun, and nothing would deter her. She was so bound for holiness that she went over her

*Don't call me a saint.
I don't want to be dismissed that easily.*

—DOROTHY DAY



priest's head to the bishop to get permission to enter the convent in her early teens. When both the priest and the bishop failed to comply with her wishes, she actually went all the way up the chain of command to the pope himself and charmed his socks off in a personal audience. Actually, do popes wear socks? I do not know.

At any rate, the pope waived the age requirement for Thérèse so she could get her way and be the first in her class to join a convent. In the end, it might have been a good thing too, because Thérèse died in her early twenties of some appropriately nineteenth-century disease like consumption. But at least she had fulfilled her convent fantasy before she started wasting away in her cell. The book she left behind has inspired millions with its central idea that ordinary people can become “saints” too, wherever they are. I'm determined that this idea, at least, is something positive I will take away from Thérèse, even though I find her manipulative behavior annoying and have made a poor job of reading her book.

It's helpful that Thérèse left behind some instructions about DIY sainthood for ordinary people, because in my own quest for sainthood, I'm not planning to join a convent, wheedle the pope, or contract tuberculosis. In fact, I start keeping a list of extremes to which I will not go:

- ✓ I will not climb to the top of a pole and live there. Simeon the Stylite did this for thirty-seven years, actually strapping himself to the pole so he wouldn't topple over when he fell asleep. I have zero interest in doing this. My bed is just fine.
- ✓ I will not allow myself to be devoured by lions, like the early Christian martyr Felicitas. To be on the safe side, I will avoid all large arenas for the year. Also zoos.
- ✓ I refuse to pluck out my own eyes for God. Legend has it that St. Lucia did this, then put her eyes on a plate and gave them to the

fiancé she had Dear Johned in order to pursue a life with God. *So* not happening here.

- ✓ I will not strip naked and parade in the town square. St. Francis did this, but that was in Europe, where they also have nude beaches.

But if the opportunity arises, I will remain open to the following:

- ✓ Magically bilocating. St. Drogo was allegedly able to achieve this, appearing in two places at once. This was not such a boon for others, however, as the afflicted Drogo is considered the Patron Saint of Unattractive People. Still, bilocation would be an enviable superpower in the harried twenty-first century. Sign me up.
- ✓ Hanging out my shingle as a miracle worker, free of charge. Who wouldn't want a miracle nowadays?

Although miracle working sounds exciting, I think that my spiritual practices will be more tried-and-true—like, say, prayer. I'm lousy at it and could use a whole new prayer MO. In lieu of fancy powers like bilocation, I'd be thrilled just to feel like God was accepting my calls.


I also plan a month to focus on reading the Bible, which is hardly going to win an extreme spirituality competition. But these tamer practices fit well with family considerations. I don't want my year of radical spirituality to be a hardship on my loved ones, though some amount of sacrifice on their part is inevitable. At least, this is what I try to tell my husband, Phil, when we are lying in bed one night in January and I outline the year for him.

"What I'm thinking," I announce, "is that there will be a month where I fast, and a month where I try not to spend money, and a month where I observe an Orthodox Sabbath." I can tell that he is listening, but in a halfhearted way as he attends to his Sudoku puzzle. I drop the bombshell.

“And then, of course, there has to be a month where I don’t have any sex,” I explain matter-of-factly. “That will be in November.”

“Okay. Uh huh.” There is a pause before his head snaps over to me with an alarmed expression. “No, wait, what did you say?”

“I said that in order for this to be authentic, there has to be a month where I give up sex. I mean, look at all the saints. Most of them were celibate their whole adult lives. Abstaining for a month is the least I can do. I think I can make it, so long as I have chocolate.”



I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints; the sinners are much more fun.

— BILLY JOEL

“But . . . but . . .” I definitely have his full attention now. “Are you serious?”

It would be great fun to see how long I can keep this going, but eventually I put him out of his misery and admit that I’m bluffing. He is immensely relieved, which makes me realize I’ve scored one point at least: anything else I subject the poor man to this year will seem like small potatoes compared to the forced celibacy I could have inflicted upon him. I will remind him of this fact should his enthusiasm for my project ever flag.

Even though I don’t quite know where this project is taking me or what this year will bring, I’m glad that I’ve decided to bring spirituality down to earth by trying to actually live it and not just read about it. In her book *Mudhouse Sabbath*, Lauren Winner points out a scene in Exodus 24 where the Israelites get the Ten Commandments and promise to obey God. The odd part of the story is the word order of their response: “All that you have said we will do and hear.” *Wait a minute*, we think. *Shouldn’t that be the other way around? How can we*

do what God commands until we've heard it first? Some biblical scholars say this is just a scribal error, and it's certainly possible that we're all reading too much into this particular bout of biblical dyslexia. But I prefer the rabbinic explanation Lauren gives: some rabbis have taught that we can't really *hear* what God is saying, or let it sink into our souls and beings, until we have tried to *do* what God is saying. The practice precedes the belief, not the other way around. Interesting. It's like what Abraham Joshua Heschel, a rabbi we'll meet again in chapter 7, has to say about spiritual practice. Although he's speaking here specifically of Jewishness, it's applicable to spiritual practice for everyone:

A Jew is asked to take a *leap of action* rather than a *leap of thought*. He is asked to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does. In carrying out the word of the Torah he is ushered into the presence of spiritual meaning. Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the hereness of God.

I'm not sure I'll be feeling much of the "ecstasy of deeds," but I do know there's a common thread in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament of walking with God. Enoch and Noah (Gen. 5 and 6) were righteous because they *walked with God*, not because they believed the right things about God or passed an orthodoxy litmus test. (Just FYI, in the interest of full biblical disclosure: the Bible makes this observation about Noah's righteousness *before* the guy gets totally wasted and curses one of his sons. After Vineyardgate, the Bible has no comment about Noah.) Walking with God comes up again in Deuteronomy 10, in the Exodus, and in Micah 6:8, one of my favorite Scriptures. To paraphrase, Micah says God has already shown us what is good: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. I like that. This year is going to be

8 . . . fLunking sainthood

about walking with God and taking a leap of faith with spiritual experiments.

And really, how hard could that be? I'm about to find out.

fasting in the desert

A fat stomach never breeds fine thoughts.

— ST. JEROME

5:57 PM. I'm seated in a straight-back wooden chair at a suburban Cracker Barrel, counting the minutes until the sun sets at 6:04 and I can break my fast. Say what you want about the Cracker Barrel, but when the chips are down, it's the soul food of any self-respecting Midwesterner. You can keep your arugula and sashimi. Pass me the mashed potatoes.

"Could you please bring the biscuits before the meal? And some jam? And a glass of chocolate milk?" I congratulate myself on keeping the edge of desperation out of my voice.

"Sure thing, hon. Be right back," promises the waitress as she dashes away. However, she doesn't return for a full fifteen minutes. The place is jammed with customers, and the smell of their meatloaf overpowers my senses as I gesture unsuccessfully to recapture her attention. I busy myself with my iPhone and try not to notice each minute ticking past on the digital clock in its top right corner.

"I'm *so* sorry, hon. We got slammed all of a sudden," the waitress apologizes as she shoves various items on the table. I smile her way but don't speak because I've already crammed a biscuit in my mouth.

I demolish the bread, the milk, and what passes for vegetables at the Cracker Barrel. Nothing has ever tasted so delicious.

I hate fasting. How am I going to make it through a month of this?

This month, for my first grand experiment, the plan is to read the Desert Fathers and Mothers about fasting and see what wisdom the ancient sages might have to offer me, a relative newbie to this ancient art. The Desert Parents were some of the first hermits of the Christian tradition. We call them “parents,” but that’s only in a spiritual sense; they were celibate monks and nuns of the third century onward who fled family life and the city so they could meet God out in the hinterlands. They lived simply, selling all their possessions, and they usually embraced solitude. Or at least, they tried to. Solitude was hard to come by, because some of the Desert Parents were like rock stars in their day. Ordinary folks had the annoying habit of knocking on their caves for marital advice, miraculous healings, or a nice pithy aphorism or two. And such intrusions were actually a good thing, because sometimes the groupies took the trouble to write down the Desert Parents’ teachings.

As ascetics, the Desert Mothers and Fathers had a great deal to say about fasting, and I’ll be reading those teachings this month. But the twist is that I am going to do the Christian fast like a Muslim during Ramadan. Although I like the Desert Parents in theory, I’m not keen to emulate their actual fasting practices, which included severe self-denial. Some didn’t eat or drink for days or even weeks on end. This seems to me like an engraved invitation for psychosis, so I’ll pass. I need a more moderate fasting practice that I can implement from day to day. I’ve always admired the annual Muslim tradition of fasting from sunup to sundown and wondered if I could do it. This is my chance to put it into practice. It seems far more sensible than outright starvation.

It's no accident that fasting is going to be the first spiritual practice I attempt. I'd love to tell you that I plotted out my year in this way because I was so excited to fast that I simply couldn't wait. But the real reason I wanted to do this discipline early in the year is because if you're fasting from sunup to sundown, what better time to do this than in winter when the days are short? And at just twenty-eight days, February is the briefest month on the calendar.

I need to become vigilant about the times the sun rises and sets, so I begin my pre-February preparation by checking online for a sun calendar for Cincinnati. On the first day of the month, I plan to get up around six o'clock to have time for a huge breakfast before sunup. The days will get a little longer as the month wears on, which means I'll have to get up earlier each morning and break the fast later each evening. But it's all right; I feel ready. I can do this. *Bring it on.*

*While you are young and healthy, fast, for old age
with its weakness will come. As long as you can,
lay up treasure, so that when you cannot, you will be at peace.*

— SYNCLECTICA

B O O T C A M P

It turns out that “bring it on” is not the most humble, spiritual phrase with which to begin a fast. Although I commence with the enthusiasm of a zealot, by the middle of the second day I'm hungry enough to call it quits and devour everything in the refrigerator.

In my church we fast once a month, but it's always on a Sunday, which means I'm not expected to produce coherent thoughts or speeches, and I can usually accelerate the experience by taking a two-hour nap in the afternoon. Fasting on a weekday is a whole different kettle of fish. I feel fuzzy and unfocused as I answer e-mails and craft

a report. The positive side of not taking an hour off for lunch is that I have more time to work, and am in fact itching for something like work to stop my brain from thinking about food. The downside is that it's difficult to concentrate. I'm starting to curse one of the things I've always loved about our neighborhood—the proximity of great restaurants right around the corner. I can smell naan baking, and what I guess to be curry.

Time passes slowly, the clock as slothful as my own body. “I don't know if I can do this,” I complain on day three to a Muslim friend who fasts like this every year. “I'm so hungry and tired all the time.” I sound whiny even to my own ears, and feel about six years old. And I can't even think about the faith-related reasons I'm supposed to be fasting; I don't feel any closer to God and haven't experienced any of the Desert Parents' promised fountains of spiritual wisdom. I'm just trying to get through each day without cheating on the fast or strangling someone. It seems a tall order.

“It will get better,” she promises. “It's normal to feel exhausted at first. A lot of people take naps during the day if they can.”

No kidding. I feel like I've been given narcotics. I'm grateful to work from home, and start shifting my work schedule to accommodate an afternoon nap during my former lunch hour.

One area where fasting cramps my style is in my writing. I love to write at cafés, with a mug of hot chocolate, noise-canceling headphones, and two hours without the interruptions of editing or family life. But what's the coffeehouse protocol for moochers? Could I go to the café, order something, and then stare at it like a wounded puppy for two hours? Or should I tell Tony, the friendly proprietor of the Coffee Emporium, that I am riding on the coattails of his Wi-Fi this month but have no intention to purchase anything for four weeks? Neither option sounds appealing, so I reconfigure my work life to write from home with only partial success. I feel vaguely housebound.

On day five, I hit my Waterloo. I have to commute into the office for meetings. Because I wake up late, I eat breakfast quickly, cramming shredded wheat cereal with blueberries into my mouth in a mad race against the colors in the sky. But by the end of my two-hour drive, I'm already hungry, and I have more than nine hours to go until sunset. It's an awful day—the weather is appalling, I can't silence my growling stomach, and I feel cold from head to toe. I wear my wool coat almost all day as I sit in meetings, musing on the truth of at least one thing I've read: fasting lowers a human being's core body temperature. Hypothesis confirmed. I am now a science experiment.

Why did anyone ever imagine that there was anything spiritual about fasting? This is boot camp. It feels punitive and harsh.

The very next morning, though, brings a breakthrough. Before dawn, I meet my friend Jamie for a blowout breakfast at IHOP, indulging in an omelet with toast and hash browns. Even though I can't finish the enormous omelet, I find that it's enough to see me through the day. Miracles and wonders! Six PM comes and I don't feel crabby or exhausted.

In fact, I am a bit elated. The South Beach Dieters must be on to something: protein does make a difference in staving off hunger.

I'm not sure if it's the new approach to breakfast or just the fact that my body has adjusted to the feast-or-famine food schedule, but things begin to look up. I have energy again. In fact, I have more energy than I'm used to in the dead of winter, the season when darkness creeps forward to gate-crash my life. The worst part is always the lack of sunlight, of rising in shadows and pushing through the long winter evenings. This year, by contrast, I welcome the redemptive darkness as a friend. Darkness is when the comforts of life—sleep and food—are most available to me. As I settle into a rhythm of the fast, I feel like I've conquered the DTs enough after the first week that I'm ready to think about spiritual questions. So far, my fast has been more like an episode of *Survivor*

than a religious quest, with little energy for anything but getting through the day. It's time to go deeper.

F A S T I N G W I T H T H E D E S E R T P A R E N T S

"So, have you had any visions yet?" a Christian friend asks me in my second week of fasting.

"Only of casseroles," I reply, trying to keep things lighthearted. In truth I am surprised by the question, and by the fact that it keeps coming up. Several people want to know whether it's true that fasting engenders trippy visions of God or the devil.

It's not true, at least for me, but there's a part of me that wishes for some dramatic manifestation, a divine response to this sacrifice. There's certainly a tradition in Christianity that shows God visiting people with extraordinary spiritual visions when they fast. Whether that's from calorie-deprived hallucination or a heightened spiritual sensitivity is anyone's guess.

But if there's too much emphasis on the fantastic, some of the fault lies with the Desert Parents, a number of whom were extremists. In history, the timing of the Desert Parents' exodus into the hinterlands of Egypt in the third and fourth centuries happened not long after the Roman Empire stopped killing Christians for sport. Were some of these Fathers and Mothers the same types who would have gladly served God by becoming lunch for lions? Maybe when the extremists were deprived of these more sudden and public routes to martyrdom, they skipped town for the desert and a new life of hermithood. One of them allegedly subsisted on the nutrients of a single pea, praising God for the miracle. They strove to model themselves after John the Baptist. I hate to remind them that things didn't exactly end well for John.

Other Desert Parents, thankfully, took a more middle-of-the-road approach, so these are the ones I focus on. Gregory the Theologian

wrote, “There are three things that God requires of all the baptized: right faith in the heart, truth on the tongue, and temperance in the body.” I chew on that list several times before committing it to my quote book. It sounds so sane. Doable, even. Cultivate faith; tell the truth; don’t be ruled by your appetites. There’s still plenty of room in that configuration for enjoying life to the fullest and loving family and friends. These are words to live by.

I also like the attitude of Theodora of the Desert. Theodora was a renowned ascetic in the late third century; monks and other people would travel from afar to hear her wisdom. Once the wife of a high-ranking tribune, she renounced all her wealth and position and died a penniless beggar. If anyone could have exercised a little puffery about fasting, it would be Theodora; she was an expert. But she didn’t teach that. Instead, she told a story about a desert monk who had learned the secret to banishing demons. Would fasting make them go away, he asked the demons? No dice. “We do not eat or drink,” replied the demons. Was it all-night prayer vigils, then? Nope—the demons did not require sleep. How about separation from the world? Hardly. If the demons were having this conversation with the monk out in the desert, hadn’t they already followed him to the back of beyond? Then the demons released their bombshell: “Nothing can overcome us, but only humility.” Mother Theodora wanted her listeners to know that while fasting, prayer, and abstinence from the world were all very well, those practices could easily be perverted into self-righteousness and dead legalism if done for the wrong reasons.

The Desert Parents suggest that humility is the key to godly fasting. When a student asked the Desert Father Moses (not the Bible’s Moses—this was centuries later) what use fasting might be, Moses

*Start by doing what is necessary, then do what’s possible;
and suddenly you are doing the impossible.*

—ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI



replied, “It makes the soul humble.” That’s it. Fasting is not for visions or even for answers to prayer. It’s not to manipulate God into acting according to our wishes, and not to show God just how willing we are to sacrifice something for him. Fasting is to help us on that painful road toward humility. That’s why, in the Bible, so many of the instances of fasting occur hand in hand with mourning—the whole sackcloth-and-ashes bit.

M A R S , V E N U S , A N D F A S T I N G

As much as I like what the Desert Parents have to say about humility, fasting doesn’t make me more humble and less worldly. In fact, all this single-minded focus on the body may be having the opposite effect.

“Have you lost much weight yet?” women ask me. Many of the women I talk to—even ones I consider to be profoundly spiritual—tell me right away, in tones that are simultaneously apologetic and defensive, that they “could never do that.” Women admire the fasting but do not aspire to it. In contrast, many of the men seem to regard fasting as an extreme sport. They want to quantify my experience—How many days? How many pounds lost? Am I really abstaining from water as well as food? Several indicate they might want to try something similar. To them it’s a competitive dare, like swallowing termites or jumping off a cliff. Something for the bucket list.

When it comes to fasting, men and women may be Mars and Venus. During my month of fasting, Brookhaven National Laboratory released an interesting study about gender and food deprivation. Scientists interviewed groups of men and women about their favorite foods before having them fast from all food overnight. The next day, the famished study participants were shown a parade of the foods they had identified as their favorites, all while hooked up to brain monitors. Both the men and the women reported that they were able

to successfully utilize certain mind-over-matter “cognitive inhibition” techniques to suppress their hunger while they saw and smelled pizza, chocolate chip cookies, and other delights. However, it seems that the women lied. Whereas the men’s brain scan results were consistent with what they reported—their brains were not responding in a dramatic way to the various food stimuli—the women reported being calm and collected while the food regions of their brains were actually hopping with exhilaration. “Even though the women said they were less hungry when trying to inhibit their response to the food, their brains were still firing away in the regions that control the drive to eat,” said the lead scientist.

The reasons for this gender discrepancy are still unclear. Women’s drive to eat may be related to the hormone estrogen, to socialized patterns of emotion, or to a more primal evolutionary drive to consume every last Oreo while it is around, since women have always been the primary feeders of the young. Whatever the reason, it seems to make obesity more of a potential issue for women, and fasting more of a hurdle.

You’d never know that, though, from reading some of the heroics of the crazy medieval women saints, several centuries after the Desert Parents. These women’s fanaticism makes the Desert Mothers look positively domesticated. The most extreme saintly asceticism came in the Middle Ages, when the emaciated look was equated with greater holiness, especially for women. (It seems not much has changed in our culture’s equating thinness with discipline and righteousness.) Medieval literature speaks glowingly of how these female saints languished for Jesus while their bodies wasted away to nothing. Although women account for only 17.5 percent of all saints who were canonized or venerated between the years 1000 and 1700, they account for 29 percent of saints known for “extreme austerities” like outrageous fasts and sleep deprivation.

Women also dominate the category of food-related miracles; some of these bony devotees spontaneously lactated and nursed without ever giving birth, while others reportedly emulated Jesus' miracle of feeding the five thousand with just a few loaves and fish. What does this mean for us? It means that fasting for all Christians can sometimes go too far, and that women in particular might need to be careful. It's a slippery slope. First you're trying out a simple fast, and the next thing you know you're like Hedwig of Silesia, levitating at the mere sight of the Eucharist, your gaunt body rising with ecstasy at the thought of a single morsel.

I reflect on all this fanaticism as I fast here in the twenty-first century, when tabloids are filled with news about which celebrity has shed her pregnancy pounds, and women's magazines, in bizarrely bipolar fashion, sport luscious layer cakes on the cover while promising surefire diet techniques in the pages within. It's a sad commentary on our weight-obsessed culture that we don't see the value of a fast for much except health and beauty. I critique the sentiment, chastising vanity and channeling my inner feminist to scourge the sexism of the diet culture, even while harboring a secret hope that maybe, in fact, I will drop a few pounds. Then I feel rotten about how worldly and vain I am, and determine not to diet, not to cast off a single ounce.

And yet it happens, even as I am eating Girl Scout cookies almost every night after dinner. I can hardly understand it, yet it is real, a bona fide postmodern miracle. The anti-manna. I am losing weight even while eating whatever the hell I want to for thirteen out of every twenty-four hours. Fasting is fabulous. I need to write a best-selling diet book.

"Wanna see something freaky?" I ask my husband and daughter, who are perched at the kitchen counter eating the supper I've prepared for them as I wait for the sun to go down. It's three weeks into the February fast. They confess that yes, they would love to see

something freaky. And so I pull my pants down, right there in the kitchen, without even bothering to unbutton them. They slide right off. Jerusha is delighted by the transgressiveness of this unexpected act, and starts to laugh. Phil is startled and a little bit worried as he laughs along with her.

“Are you sure you’re eating enough?” he asks.

“Yes, I think so,” I reassure him. “It’s not as dramatic as it seems. These are already my biggest jeans.” But in my mind I am already thinking about The Box in the basement, the one that holds my B.J. jeans (Before Jerusha). I wonder if I could ever fit into those again?


I am simultaneously proud and ashamed of myself. In her excellent book on fasting, Lynne Baab talks about the hidden dangers of fasting in a diet culture, when we are fasting for some other reason than simply to grow closer to God. Some people, she argues, should never fast from food, and it’s not just the usual suspects—pregnant or nursing moms, diabetics, the elderly, the infirm. She also exempts anyone who has ever struggled with an eating disorder, and admonishes yo-yo dieters who might be tempted to try crazy fasts for anything but spiritual purposes. I am particularly struck by what she says about the motives for fasting, which come down to a simple saying of Jesus: no one can serve two masters. If we’re fasting for the secret purpose of weight loss, we aren’t doing it with the singleness of heart that the Bible encourages.

As much as I get it, it’s another thing to live it: I remain secretly pleased by the less matronly figure I spy in the mirror.

S O I ’ M F A S T I N G . . . W H Y , E X A C T L Y ?

If I’m not fasting for weight loss or self-improvement, why am I doing this? Some clarity comes when I read Scot McKnight’s book *Fasting*, which challenges me to avoid fasting only in order to squeeze

something spectacular out of God. McKnight wants Christians to move away from a spiritually immature idea of fasting (that is, to manipulate God into answering our prayers) to a more mature notion of focusing attention on God and letting worldly things fall away. McKnight objects to the whole “if A, then B” paradigm of fasting, calling Christians not to practice “instrumental fasting”—fasting with the idea of God as Santa Claus who will reward us if we’re really, *really* good and don’t eat all the cookies.



Fasting is not the means by which we are somehow turned into Aladdin and God is turned into our compliant genie, sent to grant our every wish. We must not think that by not eating we can have God eating out of our hand.

— L Y N N E B A A B

I cheer for McKnight’s argument but can’t rise to that level of maturity. Maybe it’s just too many years spent in a conservative church that at least implicitly teaches that when we fast, we can count on loads of good stuff coming our way: physical healings, answers to spiritual questions, divine guidance on relationships, the works.

What’s more, I’ve experienced enough of those happy results myself that I can’t just blithely dismiss them as a false use of fasting. Once, in my congregation, all of us fasted and prayed for a little boy who had been in a serious car accident. He recovered completely. What can I say? Yes, he was getting the best medical care; yes, he had a tremendously supportive family; and yes, maybe he would have pulled through no matter what. It’s very possible that his recovery had nothing to do with the fact that two hundred people gave up food and drink so they could more completely concentrate their prayers for his recovery. But somehow, that explanation does not resonate with