

FASTING

In my own experience, fasting exemplifies this trust in the tradition. Anyone who has seen my waistline knows that I won't be accused of asceticism in regard to food. But years ago I began the practice of fasting ... for a meal, for three meals, even for a few days on a few occasions. I don't do this religiously, but rather occasionally. Anyway, when I fast, I don't in any way feel closer to God.

In fact, when I fast, I mostly feel closer to pizza. And glazed doughnuts. And tortilla chips. When I simply miss a couple of meals, they call to me, they haunt me, they stimulate culinary fantasies that in turn stimulate my salivary glands, and if that sounds a little sicko, I suppose it is. And maybe that's the point of fasting, I'm realizing.

For example, a couple of years ago I had decided to fast on a certain day. I was running errands, and I found myself driving into a Dunkin' Donuts store and buying a glazed doughnut, something I seldom do when I'm not fasting. I had taken one bite out of the sugar-fat confection when I remembered, Shoot! I was supposed to be fasting today! The proverbial red devil with his pitchfork and arrow tail was predictably perched in whispering distance to my ear, and you can guess what he said: Well, you've already blown it! Might as well eat the whole thing. While you're at it, those bear claws look pretty good, and you haven't had a jelly-filled sugar doughnut in years, and I think your blood levels for chocolate are kind of low, so you probably need a chocolate crème-filled too.

Meanwhile, in the other ear came the sound of my better angel's howling laughter. Instead of feeling mad at myself or guilty, I was totally amused.

Even though I didn't have the foggiest notion of exactly how fasting was supposed to work, somehow that moment of laughing at myself told me that even though I was failing at fasting, the practice of fasting was succeeding. I smiled, threw the doughnut away, and got back on the wagon with my fast for the rest of the day.

Nobody ever explained to me how fasting is supposed to work; the "rules of the art" of fasting weren't known explicitly to me or to the mentors (masters in Polanyi's lexicon) who told me I should do it. I just trusted my mentors and the tradition they represented, even though I couldn't "analyze and account in detail for its effectiveness." Now, based on my experience, if you asked me how the practice of fasting works, here's what I'd say . . . admitting quickly that my understanding of fasting is probably more developed than my actual resistance to doughnuts, and that's kind of sad.



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During that day of fasting, I felt and acknowledged my weakness in the face of impulses and cravings from my body. Doing so was so humbling that it erupted in a good laugh at myself. The laughter expressed a kind of sympathy for myself, I think, like when we laugh at someone who trips and falls or otherwise embarrasses himself. And it also expressed, I think, a kind of joy in learning something, an acknowledgment that I had little idea how much my life was controlled by bodily appetites. At least at that moment, through the subconscious magnetism of sugar and fat that drew me into the parking lot, into the store, and up to the counter, I had a better idea of my weakness than I did before. The giant Goliath in the biblical story was felled by a single smooth stone, and my willpower was felled by the pleasure contained in a single bite of a glazed doughnut. At that moment it became a little harder to be proud of my exploits as a pastor or author.

Second, when I fasted that day, I practiced impulse control. Of course, I didn't even know how out-of-control my impulses were until I had taken the first hundred-calorie bite. But when I dropped those five hundred remaining calories of delight into the trash can, I said a completely unheroic, embarrassed, and humbled no to my craving. Simultaneously, I asserted to myself the importance of something other than impulse gratification. In this case, the "something other than impulse gratification" was a kind of vague desire for spiritual growth . . . maybe not very impressive, but at least better than a doughnut.

Fasting that day also helped me trade something I could see for something I couldn't. Somehow, admitting (with a laugh) my spiritual poverty and weakness of will opened me up to receive a different kind of sweetness and satisfaction. Again, I didn't know exactly what that sweetness and satisfaction might be, but because of my trust in my community of mentors and the tradition they carried, I had a hunch it would be worthwhile.

Now, I look back on my occasional small experiments in fasting over the years and feel my hunch was validated. I think back to last week, when someone sent me a link to a website where a critic of my work indulged in some high-flying religious character assassination. My reaction to being misrepresented, insulted, and mocked (this website did all three) was quite literally visceral. I felt something tighten in my gut, strangely similar in some ways to the craving for a chocolate-covered glazed doughnut. I started thinking about ways I could get back at this fellow, things I could write that would prove to him and to all virtual reality who the better man is. It was a kind of hunger . . . for revenge, I'm ashamed to say, and for self-justification, and to win and to hurt rather than lose and be hurt.

And sitting here now, I wonder if my ability to let that feeling go last week didn't have something to do with letting five hundred calories of delight drop behind the Thank You sign on a trash can door one day. A little practice at impulse control, a little practice at facing my weakness, a little practice at laughing at my pretensions to maturity and spirituality, and a new possibility was actualized . . . thanks to a tradition carried by a community, embodied in some mentors who shared "elbow knowledge" with me, a slightly chubby guy with a sweet tooth, who is still overly concerned about his reputation but yet wants to follow Jesus and become more of what he was and is.

They say that practice makes perfect, but I wouldn't know about that. What I do know is that practice makes possible some things that would otherwise have been impossible.

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