

Plain old sloth: A case of soul-weariness

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

I've had plenty of chances to laugh at myself in the last year. Once, when I was sunk so deep in lethargy and sloth that there seemed no end in sight, an interviewer termed me "a docent of hope." How comical, to be reminded that the books I churned out over the past ten years—*Dakota*, *The Cloister Walk*, *Amazing Grace* and *The Virgin of Bennington*—were out there in the world, proclaiming good news while I sat stupefied, unable to write even a postcard.

The disparity was grim, but funny: God's grace working despite my weakness, or maybe because of it. I was tempted at times to regard myself and my work as a fraud. But then I realized I could be a fraud only if I bought into the myth of celebrity. By that I mean the notion that people who write books on spirituality do so because they've got it all figured out. They have somehow "succeeded" at the spiritual life. Once a journalist titled an interview with me, "Woman Finds Peace in Monastery." A monk who had seen the piece commented, "How did you do that? I've been here for 40 years, and I've never found peace."

Through my writing I had evidently (and unwittingly) become a celebrity "seeker," with appeal to other seekers. Americans have a remarkable faith in the perfect method: the right diet, the right exercise regimen, and the right way to pray, down to the right kind of meditation space, the right kind of chair or pillow, the right kind of breathing. I was once informed by another monastery guest that I wasn't "on a real retreat," which was news to me.

We would do well to recall Graham Greene's insight that people can pray most anywhere—a concentration camp, a prison, the smoldering ruins of a bombed-out building. It's only the comfortable middle class, he said, that demands to pray in suitable surroundings. More important, we could take to heart the admonition of Jesus that it's not technique that heals us, but faith. He calls us not to be proficient, but to be faithful. And faith does not traffic with success, or failure. It does know

comedy, however. My most “spiritual” activity, over the past year, was cleaning commodes and urinals for my husband; giving him baths and helping him change his clothes. I may not have been good at praying my beloved psalms, but the prayer of the commode—that, I could handle.

The comedy of grace is that it must so often come to us as loss and failure and cleaning commodes because if it came as success and gain and sweet-smelling flowers, we wouldn’t be grateful. We would, as we are wont to do, take personal credit for the unwarranted gifts of God. For the grace to be grace, it must give us things we didn’t know we needed, such as the pain of loss, or illness, or spiritual drought. As we stumble through the altered landscape of our lives, we find that God is enjoying our attention as never before. And maybe that’s the point. We have finally dropped the mirror, and are looking for God. It is a divine comedy.

Even if we’re angry at God, asking “Where were you when this happened?,” we are more attentive and responsive to God than in better times. Eventually, if we cling to our hope, or even the remembrance of hope, we can learn to say with the psalmist, “Happy indeed the heritage that falls to me.” Even if our lot is loss and pain, we recognize our particular suffering as our share in the cross, in the common suffering of humanity. We deal the cards we’ve been given, and look for whatever grace may be hidden in our painful circumstance.

Our nation was dealt a very bad hand in the horror of September 11, 2001. But the grace notes were there, even as the towers fell. The calls and e-mails that poured out of the building were an affirmation of life and love. “I love you; take care of yourself”; “I love you and the kids, God bless you and good-bye,” or simply “You’ve been a good friend.”

The unspeakable loss was, I believe, also an invitation to the grace of aridity. God went to work on us, and we became a more thoughtful people, if only briefly. Given the nature of our culture, the most remarkable thing about the week after 9/11 was that we experienced a world without television and celebrity trivia.

We’re told that we’ve now gone back to “normal,” and it would seem so. We’re fussing again over what Ben Affleck eats for breakfast, what Jennifer Lopez is wearing, or not wearing. We’re caught up in the new season of *The Sopranos* and *Survivor*. But the comedy of death is that it leads to a better perspective on life. The contemplation of death—whether it is the death of 3,000 people, or of a beloved

family member, or ourselves—encourages us to set aside the unessentials that can fill our days, and to focus on what matters. After September 11, we heard of families reconciling, old friends getting back in touch, people reassessing their priorities, leaving the brokerage job in order to become a teacher.

But some of us were stunned into silence. Not the good and valuable silence that allows us to listen to God, to recollect ourselves in right relationship to God and others, “to be still, and know God is God.” Not the ineffable but indispensable silence of that peace which passes understanding. The silence I mean is the destructive silence of despair. It shuts us down, isolates and incapacitates us. And it has a powerful ally in plain old sloth.

I have always been an industrious person, good at meeting deadlines. My strength has always been that of the woman warrior, good in a crisis, good at striving against the odds. But as so often happens when God sets about to change us, this year my strength became my weakness. I could function, but not feel. I could generally meet my responsibilities as a caregiver to my husband and my dying father, and help support my mother, but I felt dead inside. I dreaded waking in the morning, and sometimes went straight from bed to the couch, where I would watch television or do crossword puzzles until it became absolutely necessary to rouse myself to action. The hateful “noon-day demon” of the desert monks had found me in the lush environs of Honolulu, and made me unable to respond to the beauty of the planet. I was a far weaker soul than I cared to admit, a person pathetically subject to the sin of sloth.

We often think of sloth as a harmless form of physical laziness, and joke about how long it’s been since we vacuumed the carpet. But sloth is much more than laziness. It is an inability to concentrate on serious matters, and profound weariness of soul. As Evelyn Waugh once wrote, “The malice of sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty (though that can be a symptom of it) but in the refusal of joy. It is allied to despair.”

Sloth and acedia, its spiritual manifestation, refuse to see the grace in barren places, and the demon calls us fools for even making the attempt. But they also cannot recognize the grace even in good things. This is why Dante, in his *Inferno*, submerges those who suffered from acedia beneath the surface of a foul marsh, mired in slime and muck. While they were alive, they were unable to rejoice in the gift of life and in the beauty of God’s creation. They explain, “We were sad in the

sweet air which the sun made cheerful, for within us was morose smoke.”

As a Benedictine oblate, I should take sloth seriously, for at the very beginning of his *Rule* Benedict asserts that it is only when we give up “the sloth of disobedience” that we can begin turning to Christ. This past year I have needed to remind myself that life, and especially spiritual life, is not a progression, but a constant turn of withering and blooming, sin and repentance, exile and return. I’ve had to remember that it is God, and not myself, who has the power to make the barren places bloom, and strike water from the rock. I thank God that, despite my numbness of this past year, I was able to delight in my husband’s company, and enjoy my father’s wit and humor until the night he died.

I pray that the time I so callously wasted this year was time that God was using, after all. I may have been praying, despite myself, the silent prayer of grief. Perhaps it is no coincidence that writing and coherent thought began to stir in me again in early September, around the time of the anniversary of the terrorist attacks.

In Romans, Paul reminds us that whether we judge one day to be better than another, or judge all days to be alike, the crucial thing is to live as if each day belongs to the Lord. The psalms remind us that to God, night is the same as day. To the person of faith, this is heaven; to one mired in sloth, it is hell. The Christian hope is that in allowing faith to illumine our darkest night we are better able to confront the darkness that strikes at noon, just when things seem to be going well, and we feel at the peak of our powers. Whether we stand in darkness or in light, God is with us there.