

Giving up reading: A Lenten discipline

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

The Monday after Easter, Hannah and Jim threw a party. We'd been instructed to bring our contraband—whatever we gave up for Lent: Beer. Chocolate. Something caffeinated. A friend of Jim's turned up with a case of retsina. Sherri brought teddies, push-up bras, silky slips and garter belts.

"You gave up lingerie for Lent?" I ask. "No," Sherri says. "I gave up sex." She leaves all the lingerie with Hannah. "Well, at least until I get married." Sherri grins. "This Lent was the beginning of my new chaste life."

The party was really just a fancy potluck. Hannah and Jim had assumed that most people had given up something edible for Lent. I bought a bag of gummy worms to bring with my book. "The bookworm," says Hannah, "is back."

I had given up reading for Lent.

Here is how it happened: When my priest asked me what Lenten discipline I had adopted, I said, with no small touch of self-righteousness, that I planned to fast every Friday. This seemed like a big deal, far more serious than giving up coffee.

"Really?" said Milind. "Good for you." His Ash Wednesday homily, in fact, had dwelt for a few minutes on fasting. He had spoken of the need to give up something that was truly important to you. To give something that was really truly yourself. He had encouraged us to remember what it was like to receive gifts from friends. So much of what made the gift meaningful, said Milind, was not the gift itself, but the spirit in which it was given. "I want to encourage you to give something to God that really matters," he had said. "Something you really love. Something that is hard to do without."

Milind sipped his coffee. "Lauren," he said, "I want you to give something else up for Lent." I raised an eyebrow. "I want you to give up reading." I glanced down at the book I had brought with me, having expected Milind to be late for our breakfast

meeting.

“Reading, it seems to me, is something you really love. It may be the thing you love most. I would like you to give up reading for Lent. I think you might spend some of the time you spend with books connecting with other people.”

“OK!” I said recklessly. I raised my water glass in a sort of toast. “Philippians 4:13!”

“You know,” I said to Milind, “reading really is my fallback activity. If I have time on my hands, what I do is read.” I wanted him to understand the depth of the sacrifice I was making.

“No, no,” said Milind. “Reading is *my* fallback activity. Reading is your life.”

I usually read on subway rides. For the first week, I people-watched instead. But that got old. I found myself preaching sermons in my head. I pictured instructing my flock on the finer points of biblical interpretation, filling in fuzzy historical details they might not know, inspiring them to lead a more committed Christian life.

In particular, I imagined the Lenten sermon I might preach 15 years from now, beginning, “Fifteen years ago, my priest asked me to do something radical at Lent. He asked me to give up reading.” There would be a few titters from the parishioners. “As most of you know, I love nothing more than curling up with a good read. That first year it was hard, at times unbearable. But I have renewed that practice every year. I look forward to the space it clears out in my brain. I look forward to the quiet time in which I hear only my words and God’s words, not the printed words on the pages of all those books.” My real-life experience was not as grand or as satisfying as that self-congratulatory imaginary sermon.

In his Ash Wednesday sermon, Milind had reminded us that the real test came in privacy: would we adhere to our devotions when no one was looking? Were we doing this to impress our friends, or to offer a gift to God?

I was pretty diligent for a while, and then I cheated. I had withstood temptation: I didn’t read the out-of-print church history book I had finally tracked down. I didn’t read the memoir I had been waiting for a year to read. I wasn’t even phased when the new Deborah Knott mystery turned up on my desk at work.

Then a friend’s memoir came out. I took it home, to add it to the growing pile of books I would delve into after the Easter Vigil. Every morning, I passed the shelf. I

peered at the book; it peered back. I took it off the shelf and ran my hands over the smooth cover.

I told myself that I had a host of legitimate reasons for reading the book. First, I could justify it on the basis of friendship: surely it would be kind to tell the author how great the book is, which I really couldn't do until I'd read it. Surely Jesus would want me to be a good friend.

Second, I could justify it as research. The book would help teach me about how to structure a narrative. I wouldn't just read it, I would outline it! That way it wouldn't be an indulgence, it would be work. Would Jesus have me sacrifice my livelihood for some silly Lenten devotion?

I knew these arguments were painfully thin. But one Thursday night, I looked at my bookshelf and said, "Screw it." I grabbed the book and dug in. I read all night. I felt like the dieter who decides to devour a gallon of Breyer's in one sitting.

I'm not sure if Lent 2016 will see me giving a self-satisfied sermon about how much I look forward to my annual reading fast. But I do think I will give reading up again next year. Giving up reading did not just leave me with more free time. It also left me starkly alone with my life.

I read for many reasons—for information, for pleasure, and because I want to figure out the craft of putting a sentence together. But I know I also read to numb any feelings of despair or misery. Sven Birkerts once wrote: "To read, when one does so of one's own free will, is to make a volitional statement, to cast a vote; it is to posit an elsewhere and set off toward it. And like any traveling, reading is at once a movement and a comment of sorts about the place one has left. To open a book voluntarily is at some level to remark the insufficiency either of one's life or of one's orientation toward it."

Even before Lent I had suspected that I used reading just this way—as a tonic or escape route. When I am upset or sad, my cure is to get absorbed in some feel-good small-town novel I've read a dozen times, like one of the books in Jan Karon's Mitford series.

During Lent, I didn't have that cure, and I found myself, not surprisingly, praying more. I prayed more because I had time on my hands. And I prayed more because I didn't have my usual distractions, I was face-to-face with my sadness and my

mistakes and could not take them to Mitford. I had to take them to God.

Of course, this is what the priest had intended. He didn't want me to give up reading just because it was the equivalent of some dearly loved possession, but because it might move me closer to God.