My Lenten fast: Giving up anxiety

by Lauren F. Winner in the February 8, 2012 issue

I worry that avian flu is finally going to hit this year and I will get into my car and head west to my stepmother's remote farm, but I arrive too late for the quarantine, or my stepsister will pull up the same moment I do and there will be enough food for only one of us, and my father and his wife will be forced into some 21st-century blended-family Sophie's choice.

I worry that my identity is being stolen by someone right this second and every cent drained out of my bank account and a Lexus bought with a credit card in my name.

I worry that I have forgotten a crucially important appointment, or maybe that I've forgotten that I'm supposed to be giving a lecture in Saskatchewan right this second and there's a small group of people sitting in an auditorium somewhere, angry and wondering where I am.

I often think I've lost my driver's license. Driving to the airport, I pull out my license five times, ten times, just to make sure I wasn't somehow deluding myself when I last checked, three minutes ago back near exit 57.

It's breathless, compulsive behavior, behavior that makes no sense, that has no reason. It feels like diesel fuel is coursing through my sternum, and there is no focusing on anything other than the object of my panic: avian flu, my lost driver's license, suddenly empty checking accounts.

Or I boil water for tea and as the tea is steeping I check four times to make sure I've turned the stove burner off, and even after I leave the house that afternoon I worry that the stove is on, that the house is burning down, and I call my neighbor and ask him to go check. The stove is always off.

For as long as I can remember, anxiety has been my close companion, having a long time ago taken up residence in the small, second-floor bedroom of the house that is my body. Sometimes my anxiety takes long naps. Sometimes it throws parties. But I don't imagine it will ever tire of this neighborhood and move out for good.

In the ecclesial calendar, we are edging toward Lent. We will open each Sunday service with a long, somber litany of repentance. We will try to go with Jesus into the desert, to devote ourselves for 40 days, as the prayerbook puts it, to "self examination and repentance . . . prayer, fasting, and self denial; and . . . reading and meditating on God's holy Word." Some of us, as a token of this self-denial, will abstain from something during Lent: we won't eat sugar, or chocolate, or drink anything caffeinated or wine. One year, I gave up cheese for Lent. This year, I am giving up anxiety.

Left to my own devices, I find that the most challenging Lenten offering I can come up with is salt-and-vinegar potato chips or exercise, so most years I wait to be instructed by some angel in my life, like the priest who once told me to give up reading for 40 days, or the colleague who looked at me over her plastic flute of Prosecco at a Shrove Tuesday pancake party and told me that for Lent, I should give up saying yes.

This year, though, as we are inching toward Ash Wednesday—the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the transfiguration—no angels are turning up with my annual instructions. And so it is that as Lent approaches, I am sitting here at the island in Brandon and Lynette's kitchen, complaining that I don't know what quasi-fast to take up this season. "Maybe I should give up gummi bears," I say, popping a green one in my mouth; Lynette always keeps a small bowl of gummi bears on her island, and I always bypass the small bowls of healthy things like almonds and sunflower seeds and cranberries (dried) and eat all the palest yellow, pineapple-flavored gummi bears and then all the greens.

Brandon picks up his wine, in a blue pottery goblet that looks like a communion chalice, and says, "Maybe you should give up anxiety." He is probably joking, but it

seems serious to me, it seems exactly right.

"Brandon," I say, "you're an angel." And I give up anxiety for Lent.

One way to give up anxiety is to medicate. I tried that once, some years ago—Paxil, for a year. It helped. It also made me gain 20 pounds, and when I finally got off it, it left me ear-ringing and migrained for over a month. I may go to the pharmacists' queue again someday—if the anxiety becomes too unpalatable, too unmanageable. But this Lent, I am going to try to give it up without a prescription.

"Her illness," Martin Luther wrote of an anxious woman he knew, "is not for the apothecaries . . . nor is it to be treated with the salves of Hippocrates, but it requires the powerful plasters of the Scriptures and the Word of God."

As Lent starts, I fall back on a practice I learned well over a decade ago when, having decided I couldn't stand one more argument with my mother about the glasses of vodka she insisted were water, I made my first foray to Al-Anon. It was there that someone made the completely shocking suggestion that my feelings needn't always get the last word in my head and that I could tell a feeling—fear, anxiety, some sort of obsession—that for the next 15 minutes, I wasn't going to pay it any heed. After a quarter of an hour, I could go back to the feeling if I want to, or I could choose to ignore it for another 15 minutes. I still live by quarter hours.

This distancing myself from a feeling for 15 minutes is possibly the most sanity-making practice anyone has ever offered me. It has short-circuited my spirals of hideous emotions more times than I can count, and during Lent I find myself invoking it at every turn: no anxiety for the next 900 seconds; maybe I will check for my driver's license or go online to see if my bank account has been hacked, but not now.

The insight that we can exercise some control over our thoughts and feelings is deep in Christianity, at least as deep as the desert. The Desert Fathers spoke of the eight *logismoi:* gluttony, lust, greed, anger, dejection, listlessness, vainglory and pride. The *logismoi* do not only tempt you to do destructive things—lust tempts you to fornicate, gluttony to overeat and so forth. The *logismoi* also teach you false stories about yourself: that you are dependent on food rather than God, that you are deserving of kingdoms.

The word *logismoi* doesn't translate very precisely—"passions" or, some people say, "tempting thoughts." I think of the term this way: the *logismoi* are false distractions that threaten to colonize your imagination. They turn your head. They take over your brain and jerk you out of reality.

The desert saints said that the beginning of renouncing a thought is simply noticing it. That is part of what I'm doing in my quarter hours; I am noticing and naming—and then, for a few minutes, quarantining—a thought. But the Desert Fathers say something more: after noticing a thought, replace it with a prayer. So if your colonizing distraction is about food—it is 2 p.m., and you ate lunch 90 minutes ago, but you find yourself daydreaming about the muffins you baked last night or the cookies 'n' cream yogurt you have sitting in the refrigerator—one thing you can do is notice the thought and then tell yourself you can't think about the yogurt. The other thing you can do is replace the yogurt with prayer. That is what I try to do to my anxiety this Lent—not just ignore it for quarter-hour increments, but sidle up alongside it with a prayer.

During Lent, I repeat this prayer, from the back of the prayerbook: "O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God." I find myself repeating it ten times a day, saying it like an incantation that may drive my anxiety away.

Sometimes I say the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." In bed at night, I revert to the rhyming patterns of childhood: "Now I lay me down to sleep." (Perhaps the refrain "if I die before I wake" should itself produce anxiety, but it turns out to do the opposite—it articulates a plan; if I die before I wake, I won't find myself in a panicky, unknown situation, out of control, precisely because this plan is in place—if I die before I wake, God will take my soul and I'll be fine.)

In the middle of class one day, I am seized by the thought that I left my stove on that morning, making tea, making oatmeal, and that by now the house has long since burned down, and the fire department didn't know how to reach me, and I will come home to black hulks of char. In class we are discussing Richard Hooker's theology of the Eucharist—how he says that you can no more give an unbaptized person the Eucharist than you can feed a corpse. I think I say very little for the last

half of class; it is all I can do not to bolt, run to a telephone, run home, which is what I start to do as soon as class is over, dump my notebooks on my office floor and trot out of the building and begin the two-mile walk home at a very fast clip, and then in the middle of the Duke gardens I stop. I crouch down and begin to say something from the psalms over and over: "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me; O Lord make haste to help me."

In the fourth century these words by the psalmist were recommended by the desert monk John Cassian above all other "pious formulas" for prayer, saying that the verse "is an impregnable wall for all who are laboring under the attacks of demons."

There, crouched by the duck pond like a soccer ball, I know I look deranged, but the panic about my stove really might be a demonic attack. I know I look like a desperate crazy lady talking to herself, rocking back and forth. I don't know exactly how long I am there or how many students walk by me, though I think the sun sets a little in the sky as I am repeating these words from the Psalms; I mean them as I have meant very few things in my life, and I determine that I will stay there for as many minutes, hours, as it takes, that I will not race home to behold my standing-up house, my not-on-fire kitchen, my half-eaten bowl of oatmeal calmly in the sink.

Later, I walk home. I make myself take a turn through the art museum on my way. I make myself stop off for dinner at a restaurant on Ninth Street. Everything is slow. Slowly, I am beginning to see what this anxiety is about, to see its lineaments: it has something to do with being left alone to handle a situation I am not competent to handle; it has something to do with being known and unknown, with the sense that I go through life hidden, masked (even all this first-person prose—I write it to hide in plain sight). And to the degree that I am masked I always risk being left alone—for once the mask comes off, once my friends and intimates, my charmed students, even my beloved, loving aunts see the corruptions and shames of my real heart, they will vanish, and I will be left alone with the tea-steeping-house-fire, left alone outside my stepmother's farm with the avian flu, alone.

Be pleased, O God, to deliver me from this.

This article is excerpted from Lauren Winner's book Still: Notes on a Mid-faith Crisis*, just published by HarperCollins and used by permission.*