Soul food: Why fasting makes sense

by Amy Frykholm in the March 8, 2005 issue

My first encounter with Christian fasting was in a Russian kitchen in the provincial city of Krasnodar in 1991. It was November and my host, a university professor, was preparing the evening meal at the beginning of the Orthodox fast called Little Lent, which is a bit like what Catholics and Protestants call Advent. While we boiled and chopped beets, carrots and potatoes, she explained that we were making a fasting salad. She added pickles and parsley and tossed the salad in sunflower oil, salt and pepper before serving it with brown bread. Olga Nikolaevna observed a partial fast—no meat and no dairy products—for the four weeks of Little Lent, and she continued to fast in various ways throughout the year. Fasting, for her, was a small piece of her religious devotion.

I was struck by the simplicity and gentle discipline of her practice. But it was more than a decade before I began to consider the purpose of this kind of fast for myself. A lifelong Protestant—at various times attending Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist churches and eventually an Episcopal church—I associated fasting with rigid control of the body, with extreme forms of self-discipline, with a denial of the flesh that I could not quite understand. In a diet- and health-obsessed culture, it is difficult to present the practice of Christian fasting as something other than another way to subdue and discipline the body. The magazine racks and newspapers are full of diet and health advice, which changes with the vagaries of consumer fads. We live in a culture with an extreme focus on the flesh and its management. Finding alternative paradigms to talk about the body is not easy.

I have come to see a certain form of fasting, however, as an antidote to obsessive behavior involving the body. Fasting as a spiritual practice is not about improving your health. It is not about becoming thinner, stronger or more supple. It is not about learning to ignore your cravings or attaining perfection. It is not even about simply disciplining your body so that it is better behaved. In my view, fasting is about three things: attentiveness, compassion and freedom.

The first lesson is attentiveness, or mindfulness. Fasting is a tool in being present to the here and now. Several months ago, drawn by a sense that fasting could be an important teacher for me, I began a partial fasting practice, abstaining from meat and dairy products on Wednesdays and Fridays. Abstention on particular days helps to mark those days, to invite the nuances of the day more fully into our consciousness. Fasting at particular meals helps us to be attentive to that meal, to the food available and our responses to it. It helps us be attentive to our own bodies, our own desires and the demands of our own flesh.

This kind of fasting does not mean ignoring hunger pains or cravings but listening carefully to them, observing how they change over time, looking at the relationship of mind and body in the experience of hunger and in the experience of food. It offers a very gentle and careful “stop” on the fast-paced road of our culture, where we are told to abide by a specific but ever-changing set of rules and rarely encouraged to listen. Fasting helps us to observe ourselves a little more keenly and to understand more deeply how we engage the basic human experience called eating.

The second lesson is compassion. Fasting teaches us about connectedness. While preparing supper one Wednesday, I was suddenly entranced by the simplicity of the food before me, by the almost universal experience of eating carrots and potatoes. I felt that I understood in a more tangible way than I had before that I am one of 6 billion people on the planet, all of whom experience eating. Instead of asking whether low-fat or low-carb foods are better for me, I began to ask about how the food I eat affects the world around me. How can the simple, everyday task of eating become an act of compassion?

Monks have restricted meat and dairy products in part because bread and vegetables have always been the food of the poor—the simplest and least expensive food available. When we voluntarily agree to share this food, we become more tangibly connected to the poverty of millions who struggle to put food on their plates for today. Though I have known for some time that many people in the world are hungry and that my experience of plenitude is a privilege, the experience of fasting made this knowledge a more physical reality to me. I understood more fully Robert Farrar Capon’s comment that we should not allow our abundance to deprive us of an understanding of hunger. Capon writes, “As long as the passion of the world goes on, we are called to share it as we can—especially if by the mere luck of the draw, we have escaped the worst pains of it.” I felt that I had found a very small way of enacting this knowledge, of letting it live in me more completely.

From this perspective we can see that fasting is not about perfection but about learning a path of love. I mentioned my experiment to a small group at my church, and as I spoke I remembered that there were three women in the room who were recovering from anorexia. What I perceived as an exercise in spiritual freedom they could easily see as a path toward self-denial to the point of death. This experience too forced my heart open a little bit wider, silenced any self-congratulatory voice in me, and urged me onward. If fasting does not fulfill this purpose, then it is really of little use at all. In Isaiah we read, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house: when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (58:6-7). This passage seems to discourage fasting for its own sake or for the sake of piety. Fasting is useless unless it teaches compassion, unless it gives way to love.

The third lesson concerns spiritual freedom. Several months into my fasting experiment, I felt the desire to challenge myself, to deepen the fast by missing one meal. I had read Richard Foster’s essay on fasting in his classic *Celebration of Discipline* and been repulsed by his discussion of how to tell when the body is reaching the point of starvation.

I decided I needed to begin a little more slowly. I quickly became aware of a new problem. By 8:00 of the morning I had decided to fast, I was in a panic. “I feel dizzy,” my brain was saying. “Oh, I am weak. I’ll never make it through the day. I’ll faint. I’ll collapse.” This was ridiculous, of course, since there have been hundreds of mornings that I have not eaten before 8 a.m. and never once felt dizzy or weak. Instead, what I seemed to be experiencing was something akin to withdrawal from an addiction. As I meditated on that panic throughout the morning, I could see all the ways that I used food for comfort, to assuage boredom, to ease fear in social situations, or to compensate for feelings of loss. I could see that food was a drug for me, and that I was addicted to it. I began to see fasting as a way to help me learn about this addiction and to invite grace in to free me from it.

By experiencing my addictive relationship to food, I became aware of other addictions and compulsions leading me away from love and filling up the spaces in me where grace might flow. Fasting creates a space where I can acknowledge spiritual freedom as my greatest desire, greater even than my desire for chocolate.

When the desert fathers spoke of the “passions” and fasting as a means to control them, I think they meant something similar to what I mean by addiction. They did not mean what we do with our whole selves—mind, body and spirit together. Perhaps they meant instead what we do compulsively, without thinking, without care for ourselves or for others, the things we do that stand in the way of connection, attentiveness and love. They meant that quality of inattentiveness that often makes us live as in a numbing dream, compelled by random desires and making random choices. As the early monastics suggested, fasting is a way to address this mode of living, a way to live in attention and freedom.

Fasting is not punishment, penitence, or even acknowledgment of our own weakness—although this last element may play an important part. I have suggested, instead, that fasting is about spiritual training—in freedom, compassion and attention. It makes us call out for grace when our addictions get the better of us, and it teaches us new means through which we can love our neighbor. But fasting is fraught with pitfalls. Guilt, fanaticism, self-righteousness, judgment of “success” or “failure,” the incessant language of “should” all can keep us from hearing the gentle lessons that fasting can teach.

Here are five suggestions to begin a fasting practice.

1) Begin very slowly. Nearly all of those who advocate fasting note that a light practice that you can follow is far better than a more restrictive practice that you cannot. This helps you to avoid patterns of failure and self-judgment, neither of which is a particularly helpful teacher. Start with one day a week or one meal a week. Restrict meat, dairy or both. If that sounds like too much, begin with just one meal. Expand only as you feel increasing freedom and desire.

2) Engage a spiritual mentor or conversation partner. With the guidance of a mentor or the help of a conversation partner, you can allow another person to observe, to help you watch out for ways that you are not allowing fasting to teach you. But don’t let the lack of a mentor stop you. Fasting is itself a teacher—you simply have to practice being mindful and attentive to its lessons.

3) Persist through imperfection. Let a bad day be a bad day. Let a good day pass without too much jubilation. Remember that this is all just training, all just practice, and need not be perfect.

4) Don’t talk about it too much. Jesus’ only counsel on fasting was not to draw attention to it. Let it be something between you and God. If your stories, over time, seem useful to others in particular circumstances, tell them, but don’t allow your practice to dominate ordinary situations and everyday activities.

5) Respect feasts as well as fasts. Feasts are also important parts of the church calendar and of human life. The experience of fasting can become so enticing that you may hesitate to observe the feast. Observe it. Experience it. Be as fully aware of it as you would be of the fast. Let it also be a teacher.

While fasting is a useful tool, it is important to recognize that it is a tool only. Its purpose is limited, and it can become useless and even selfish if it does not deepen our compassion and teach us how to more fully love God and our neighbor.