Lent's terrible gift: Lessons in dying

by Kay Lynn Northcutt in the March 9, 2010 issue

At the end of every yoga class we practice dying. Our teacher cautions us that the corpse pose, or *shavasana*, is the most difficult of all yoga postures to master, but for those of us whose legs and arms are trembling from an hour's exertion in warrior pose, downward-facing dog and cobra, the prospect of relaxing horizontally on one's yoga mat brings both relief and the impertinent question, "How hard can it be?"

Fascinated, I report to my husband, "Every day at the conclusion of yoga class we practice dying." "That's interesting," he says, trying to share my enthusiasm. "It's kind of like Lent," I venture, "except it's a physical practice, not so much a spiritual one. Lent is when we're supposed to practice dying, right?"

When I was a young woman and my best friend died of lung cancer, my minister told me, "You've been given a terrible gift at so young an age, Kay. A terrible gift." That two-word phrase, "terrible gift," functions as a parable for me. New Testament scholar Brandon Scott reminds us that the Greek word *parabole* can mean to "throw beside." Most typically a parable throws something *beside* something else—unexpectedly.

Take the kingdom of God being like a woman, for example. That must have been a real howler to first-century listeners of Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is like a woman? No way. Women are property. Women are chattel. Women are impure. The kingdom of God is like a woman? Impossible. Ridiculous. Insulting.

But this is what a parable does. Like a belly flop into a lake, a parable leaves one feeling emotionally and theologically stinging, breathless, disoriented—like "terrible" and "gift." They aren't ordinarily thrown down beside each other. But that's what Lent does. It throws life down with death, and death with life. We practice dying. We learn living.

With the advent of hospice, many of us have been given the terrible gift of walking alongside those we love who are dying. When my mother's dying began in earnest she'd call from her bed, "Girls!" My sister and I would come running. "What, Momma?" "You've got to do something about all these children playing under my

bed.” My sister Amy stood at one side of the bed, I on the other. Our eyes met. This wasn’t the first time those children had been caught playing under Mom’s bed. We had a plan.

“Mom, you’re having another hallucination.” She lay quietly. Several minutes passed as she absorbed the information. “Right. It’s a hallucination. I’m dying,” Mom said slowly and patiently to us (as if my sister and I were a couple of slow-witted children). “But could you please take all these children out from underneath my bed and outside to play? They need sunlight and fresh air. Give them a good lunch. I’m going to rest while you and your sister take care of them. I just love having them, but I’m too tired.”

Amy bent down on the far side of the bed, I on the other. Together we gently shooed imaginary children out from under the bed. As we opened the door to the backyard, Mom expended the last drop of energy she had for that day, calling out, “Thank you, girls!” Then, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Amy and I sat down outside in the Oklahoma sun and did both.

Lent, if we accept its terrible gift, gives us 40 days to practice dying. Paradoxically, Lent’s terrible, life-giving wisdom is painfully simple: each of us dies the way we have lived. I don’t mean that the easiness or difficulty of our dying is determined by our living. Physically speaking, my mother’s death was a difficult, traumatic one. But in her death, my mother, who spent her life caring for children as an early childhood educator, was herself cared for—and kept company by—children. In the last 21 days of her life, Mom whispered to us about “the most darling little boy” who was holding her hand.

As I watched my mom with those imaginary children, I was reminded of another dying time, when, as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I was a reader for theologian Joseph Sittler at the end of his life. He spent his last days precisely as he had lived his best ones: with a relentless hunger for God, poetry, wisdom. He wanted to hear Emily Dickinson’s poems read aloud. He was restless for a note-by-note harmonic explanation of the most exquisite moment of Bach’s *Saint John Passion* so that he might, as he said, “know exactly what Bach is doing right here.”

Those rambunctious children under Mom’s bed and Sittler’s unquenchable thirst for wisdom during the final heartbeats of his life make Lent’s typical claim on us seem abstemious. Bittersweet, that during the church season in which we anticipate our

dying we preoccupy ourselves with small things, *inessential* things “given up” for 40 days.

Thomas Merton noted the uncanny way North American culture focuses our attention on the inessential. Spiritual teachers for centuries call such misplaced focus “distraction.” Merton excoriated our North American preoccupation with the question, “Am I happy?” as exemplifying the diversion of our lives to banality, superficiality and achingly empty living:

> When we live superficially . . . we are always outside ourselves, never quite “with” ourselves, always divided and pulled in many directions . . . we find ourselves doing many things that we do not really want to do, saying things we do not really mean, needing things we do not really need, exhausting ourselves for what we secretly realize to be worthless and without meaning in our lives. (*Thomas Merton*: *Love and Living*)

Although Merton did not live to see the Columbine massacre or the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building, he anticipated their possibility, warning that lives adapted to the American pursuit of happiness create an uncontrollable monster called self-alienation that seeks release in “dramas of violence.” In an unpublished lecture to novices, Merton insisted that the right question, the true question, is not “Am I happy?” but “Am I free?”

The question “Am I free?” is the terrible gift Lent comes bearing in its arms for us this and every year. Lent asks us how we are living our lives, and reminds us that we die the way we live. Lent is the time not for giving up something of little consequence, but for identifying what is most essential in our lives, what it is that we are living for. As Merton put it, “Ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for” (*My Argument with the Gestapo*). That is Lent’s terrible gift: an examination of our living.

Recently, in a conversation with a woman whose faith was great, I couldn’t help asking, “What do you think happens when we die?” Without a pause she said, “I think Jesus sends someone to comfort us. Someone particularly special to us that only Jesus would know about. Not a saint. Jesus would never send a saint or anyone ‘big’ in the pantheon of the church.”

Wishing desperately to believe such a thing but unable to get my theological worldview wrapped around it, my mind's eye went to the final weeks of Mom's dying and to that darling little boy who held her hand—the one we never saw, but whom we suspect of being the source of her smile every once in a while, even long after she'd lost consciousness.

We die the way we lived. Of course Mom died with a little boy's hand holding hers and Joseph Sittler with Bach's *Saint John's Passion* in his strong hands. Lent is a perfect time to spend 40 days becoming crashingly clear about the lives we are living, and a great time to practice dying so we that can live.