

More on fasting and self-help

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I cringed when I read Jeffrey MacDonald's accusation, [quoted here](#) by Steve Thorngate, that Americans have turned Lent into a spiritual self-help event "whose effectiveness is measured by how well it entertains us and affirms what we already believe."

I love the Lenten season, and I followed its trajectory even when I had no other religious practice. But I also I recognize how my practices have sometimes fit MacDonald's characterization as "spiritual self-help" (help, by the way, I've badly needed). That said, I've been arguing with MacDonald ever since:

- What exactly about contemporary Lenten fasts (giving up chocolate, for example) is entertaining? Is it the way we talk about Lent, regaling our friends with stories of our self-sacrifice with the knowledge that our practice is really very small?
- If Americans were conducting Herculean "true" fasts for Lent, we wouldn't know about it, right? Jesus, after all, taught us to fast and pray in secret.
- Is "true deprivation" really the point of fasting, or is true fasting measured by the extent to which it turns us toward God? Deprivation for deprivation's sake could easily become competitive or self-aggrandizing. Biblical writers frequently make the point that God isn't interested in displays of piety but in justice and love.

I'd like to see a trend toward *communal* Lenten practices, in which groups could share the struggles and difficulties of their practice and teach and learn from each other. This might be a corrective for those Lenten disciplines that are not so different from starting a new diet or exercise program.