The fast I chose

Giving up donuts for the sake of cholesterol didn’t bring me closer to God. But it did teach me something about sacrifice.

by Katherine Willis Pershey

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I haven’t consumed alcohol, grains, dairy, legumes, or added sugars since January 1. Instead, I’ve been filling my plate with vegetables, meat, nuts, and fruit. (Oh, and eggs. So many eggs—scrambled, fried, hard-boiled. It’s a small miracle that I don’t dream about eggs, I’ve consumed so many.)

Perhaps you recognize this particular mode of eating as paleo, that scientifically dubious theory that our bodies haven’t evolved quickly enough to tolerate all the refined carbohydrates and sugars we consume, and that we should focus on the sorts of foods our paleolithic ancestors would have hunted and gathered.

The particular iteration of paleo I’ve been following is called the Whole30—participants commit to following the restrictive elimination diet for 30 days. This meant to give people firsthand data on how their bodies respond to different foods.

The Whole30 is a secular fast, a postmodern manifestation of the sort of food prohibitions traditionally associated with religious practice. The Hindu must not eat beef; those who keep kosher or honor Halal restrictions avoid pork. Meanwhile, the Whole30 adherent asks her waiter to hold the blue cheese when she breaks bread with friends. (Metaphorically, that is; she can’t eat the bread, either.)

Though I haven’t experienced cravings, I have rarely thought about food so much in my life. Meal planning has taken up a lot of space in my brain this month. Indeed, the first time I attempted a Whole30 I lasted about a day and a half, largely because

I was so turned off by the compulsive label-reading it required. (OK, also because a friend offered me a slice of homemade strawberry pie. *Always* eat the homemade pie.) When you're on the Whole30, the old food categories of clean and unclean are transfigured into compliant and noncompliant. The difference is that you're not refraining as a sign of tribal identity or as an act of faith. You're sacrificing the donut not for the sake of God, but for the sake of your cholesterol.

I have developed a minor obsession with my body. At first I was tracking the flu-like symptoms of sugar withdrawal and the atrocious bloating that frequently bedevils people during their first week on the program. Then I was marveling over my remarkably improved Fitbit stats; my heart rate had been creeping dangerously high when I went running, and midway through the month it abruptly leveled off to an ideal cardio zone. All along I've been watching my waistline shrink. Weight loss is not the emphasis of the Whole30, so much so that one of the most popular hashtags associated with the program's social media presence is #nonscalevictory. Weighing oneself is forbidden, though I confess that this is one of the few rules I broke.

The results aren't merely physical, though. I'm amazed by my dramatically increased sense of self-efficacy. If I can give up half-in-half in my coffee, I can do practically *anything*.

As pleased as I am with the results of this experiment, I'm also ambivalent. I know that my interest in the circumference of my hips is the consequence of a culture that unapologetically prefers its women petite. Nothing says capitulation to that culture quite like going on a trendy diet, even one so radically different in intent and content than the disordered eating of my teenage years. Furthermore, while it's well and good to be mindful of one's health, the Whole30 makes something of an idol of it. With the horrifying dawn of the Trump era, how can I afford to be fretting about noncompliant ketchup?

I've been thinking a lot about my friend Lee Hull Moses's recent article about the 40th anniversary edition of *More With Less*, the Mennonite cookbook that emphasizes ethical eating. She writes,

> Throughout the book runs a deep commitment to Christian ideas of hospitality, stewardship, gratitude, and justice. The call to respond to the food crisis comes from a conviction that we are connected to our global neighbors. Justice requires us to pay attention to how our actions impact

> others with whom we share this planet. Food—especially good, nutritious food—is a gift to be grateful for and to be used wisely.

There's nothing especially ethical about the Whole30; no sense of hospitality, stewardship, gratitude, or justice. Of course, a friend (who may or may not be Lee Hull Moses) admitted that she had suspicions about the ethics of the Whole30—right before she admitted that she had just eaten Papa John's pizza, diet Pepsi, and Girl Scout cookies for dinner. There is often, perhaps even always, a gap between our ideals and our actions.

And so I remain conflicted. I desperately needed a detox after the holidays and the election, and I'm grateful for the clear benefits of the program. But it wasn't the fast Isaiah would have chosen for me—no bonds of injustice were loosened, no oppressed were set free. But even as my cholesterol has decreased, my capacity for sacrifice has increased. And sacrifice—not for one's personal good, but for the common good—is a practice worth reclaiming.