

Why we need the grime of Ash Wednesday

Like the sludge on a car in the winter, most of our messes accumulate gradually.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 26, 2020](#) issue



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Driving in an upper midwestern city during winter is to put one's car through a daily salt bath. Unlike salt float tanks for the body, there's no therapeutic benefit to these street salt baths. They rot cars and turn painted steel into iron oxide. They consume, to use a Jesus verb.

My car has been rotting for more than a month, if that's what happens when it doesn't get run through the car wash. I don't avoid the wash out of sloth. It's just no fun spending money on such temporary delight when salt and slush recoat the car within the first three blocks. For much of the winter, I live content with my car's

ashen gray color.

The other day I was driving behind an SUV when I suddenly felt a burst of pride. This guy's car was more salt-splattered than mine. On the tailgate window, in large letters, were those famous begging words with exclamation points: WASH ME!! As I followed the car for several miles, my mind wandered. What if the owner himself—not some smart aleck randomly tagging cars—put up that lettering? Maybe he honestly thought some kind soul would walk up to him in a parking lot and say, “Can I please wash your car for you?” Assuming, though, that the owner wasn't quite so naive, I began to wonder if he bore no shame. Here he is driving around with a billboard hanging on the back of his car and, for what any observer would know, those words may have been up there for years.

Perhaps he doesn't see the words because he uses the car's backup camera when pulling out of a parking space. Or maybe he turns his head when backing up, but the letters in reverse read like gibberish, so he decides they have no meaning. Most likely, however, the grime and salt spray have simply accumulated gradually to the point where he doesn't even care about the graffiti.

That's the way grime and dirt accumulate in our lives—gradually. If someone were to step into my house and determine it to be a total mess, there wouldn't be just one dirty dish in the kitchen sink. There would be all kinds of messes that multiplied over time. Couples who divorce don't usually do so because of one incident. Their grievances and resentments accumulate over time.

In C. S. Lewis's classic *The Screwtape Letters*, senior devil Screwtape writes to his apprentice devil Wormwood about the best methods for delivering souls to hell. The cumulative effect of small and nearly imperceptible sins, notes Screwtape, beats the spectacular wickedness of dramatic sin. “Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

The salt spray on the SUV I tailed that day was accumulated grunge, just like most of the messes in my life. For the record, my house is pretty neat. It's the sordid pieces of my personal life that accumulate without fanfare—the capacity to judge, the unforgiving spirit, the self-centered ways, the distracted me. This is why I need Ash Wednesday and that gray smudge. Yes, it adds grime on top of grime. But that ash functions like a milestone or signpost, because it's in the shape of a cross.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Gradual grime."