

Giving Up Our Aggressive Thoughts

You may or may not be aware of it, but February 22nd was the beginning of Lent this year. Now did you know that in medieval times, the Catholic Church forbade Christians to eat before 3pm throughout the 46 days of Lent and also forbade them to eat any meat, dairy products or eggs? Moreover, on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, Christians could not eat at all. Luckily for them, chocolate had yet to be discovered by the Europeans (the first chocolate bar was not made until 1847) so that was one thing they would not miss. But they might well have missed sexual intercourse as that too was banned for the duration!

Today, many individuals who say they are Christian happily eat as many pancakes as they possibly can on Shrove Tuesday and then gorge on chocolate eggs on Easter Sunday, whilst carefully forgetting about the fasting bit in between. Of course, some individuals still decide to give up sweets, chocolate or alcohol for Lent, but they do so primarily for health reasons rather than as some kind of spiritual penance.

This year, I did seriously consider giving up chocolate in the evenings or honey and marmalade at breakfast for the duration of Lent. But then, I talked myself out of it.

I was feeling a little guilty about that until I came up with the idea of committing to giving up my aggressive, judgemental thoughts for Lent. I was rather pleased with myself for thinking of this innovative idea, particularly as it meant I could still eat whatever I liked this month. Then I watched a talk by the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr who basically suggested a similar idea of doing something good for the world for Lent rather than simply depriving ourselves of something pleasurable.

I also went to church on the first Sunday of Lent and our wonderful curate Tom Phipps gave a sermon during which he said something like, 'Maybe Lent should be more about turning toward Christ than turning away from Oreos. (which was really good news for Gloria because she loves Oreos!)

Now when I say that I have committed to giving up my aggressively judgemental thoughts for Lent, I am not talking about never having such thoughts in the first place. Do you realise that there is absolutely no way that we can stop a

judgemental or angry thought from popping up in our mind? We simply do not have the psychic ability to see these nasty thoughts getting ready to invade our consciousness. Similarly, it would be wonderful to be able to stop a feeling of anger or resentment before it began to pollute our whole being. But we just can't.

So when I say that I am giving up angry, judgemental thoughts for Lent, I am really talking about committing to noticing every time an angry thought pops into my mind and then pausing for a second or two to give it up to the ether. I have been practising this for several days already and I have to report to you that it is actually quite a fun thing to do, especially if you do it out loud with a friend.

For example, when Gloria and I are out and about in the car, and one of us – usually Gloria I have to say – has an angry thought about a fellow road user, we now both sing out 'Let it go. Let it go!!' (to the tune from Frozen) This actually makes driving around the over-crowded roads of South Manchester much more fun and has even led to us getting the giggles from time to time. But I do genuinely believe that if we long for our world to be more at peace, giving up our own aggressive thoughts like this could well make a tiny contribution to that long-term goal.

This practice is also good for those of us who want to protect our own long-term health and well-being, because although the energy of anger can give us an immediate and sometimes quite pleasurable burst of strong energy, in the long run the over-fiery energy of anger can weaken our heart and other parts of our body.

We can also damage our relationships with others by regularly entertaining angry, resentful or judgemental thoughts about them. Even if we are far too 'nice' or polite to express our negative thoughts about them to their face, those whom we gossip negatively about will still feel our negative energy winging its way toward them on some level or another.

So now that I hope that I have persuaded you of the benefits of offering up our angry, judgemental thoughts throughout the month of March, I would like to say a little more about how we might do this. The Buddhists have a wonderful

practice to help them to 'love their enemies' which I think would work very well for us this month.

When a Buddhist practitioner brings to mind someone who irritates them, or even someone whom they believe that they hate, they are advised to say to themselves, 'Just like me this individual is trying to avoid suffering. Just like me, this person is seeking happiness.' In my experience, silently saying these two short sentences to myself when someone annoys me, really seems to help to transform my anger into genuine compassion for both my 'enemy' and my own angry, judgemental self.

So there you have it: a fun way to commit to bringing just a few less drops of negative, destructive energy into our pretty dark and aggressive modern world this month. Of course, if you would rather give up booze or chocolate for a month or so, I salute you! Your willpower is clearly stronger than mine.

My will to be a peace bringer in our troubled world however *is* pretty strong. I am also convinced that 'letting go' of any aggressive thoughts that rises up within me throughout the month of March will place a drop or two more of peaceful energy into our beloved Planet Earth – a planet that is still plagued by so much human conflict. Isn't that goal at least worth a month-long try? Shall we just give it a go and see what unfolds?

Peggy Foster

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