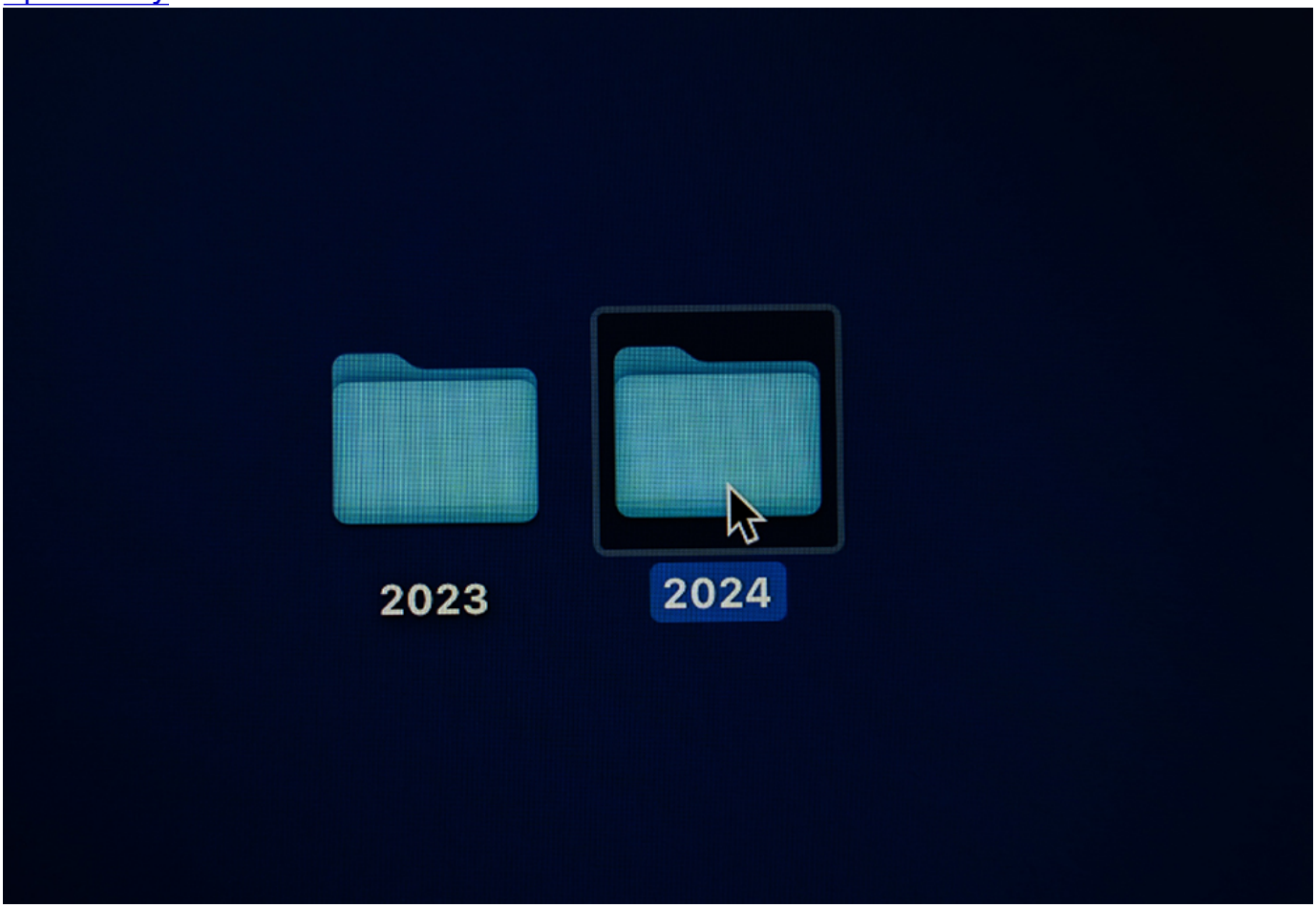
Columns
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Kajetan Sumila)



by Julie A. Ferraro

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The end of a year and the beginning of a new one naturally leads to self-reflection, with a concurrent desire to improve one's life. I'll admit this is true in my own life.

In order to not take myself too seriously, I like to joke that the only two things I drool over are classic cars and chocolate. Coming from five generations of mechanics, the first is inherent: I can't help admiring — and sometimes writing about — the old muscle cars, especially Mustangs. My bucket list included the cars I wanted to drive as part of my "need for speed": a Corvette (done), a Dodge Challenger (done), a Mustang (I've owned two), and a Ferrari (I've ridden in one, but not yet driven one). For me, there's nothing quite like the feeling of punching the accelerator, hearing the engine roar and watching the speedometer exceed 100 miles per hour.

That I've "infected" my sons with this same enthusiasm for fast cars has caused some concerns over the years. When driving them on outings down country roads, the chant of "Faster, Mom, faster!" used to make me laugh. That my two oldest sons gravitated to a local racetrack to test their abilities only bothered me because of the expense on their respective tight budgets. And, there was the time when my youngest and I raced along at 90 miles an hour in the city limits.



(Unsplash/Elijah Mears)

Thinking of St. Benedict's admonition, found in Chapter 48 of his Rule — "let all things be done with moderation" — I cannot deny the lack of balance in my life.

When it comes to chocolate, Kilwin's Fudge and Cadbury Mini Eggs — or their seasonal iterations: Harvest Handfuls and Mini Snowballs — are consumed by the pound. The fudge, sold in 8-ounce slabs, becomes a really bad habit as I eat it like a sandwich, instead of slicing off bite-sized morsels with the cute little wooden knives included in the box. The Cadbury are poured by the handful and there have been Lents when I've devoured 13 pounds in six weeks. This is not moderation, by any stretch of the imagination.



A closeup shot of Cadbury Mini Eggs (Unsplash/Ben Griffiths)

When justifying such behaviors, it's all too common to think, "There are worse things I could be doing." That is, however, no excuse. The overall implications of this lack of balance take me away from appreciating the beauty and blessing of a particular moment — like when chatting with a friend during a road trip and suddenly being distracted by the fully restored 1957 Chevy headed in the opposite direction along the highway.

The craving for chocolate can interrupt my train of thought, or focus on prayer in the chapel of the Benedictine monastery where I live and work — especially if I know there will be chocolate cake for dessert at lunch.

Spiritually, mentally, and physically, this is not good, nor conducive to interior balance.

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As my yearly assessment continues, I have to throw my writing into the mix of what causes imbalance in my life. For over 50 years, since I started tapping out short stories on a manual Smith-Corona typewriter in the basement of my parents' house, the various inspirations that strike me turn into what I have started describing as an "illness" that must run its course. Sometimes, this takes a few days. Other episodes can last as much as six months, with daily — usually early morning — sessions creating plots and characters. Talk about a serious distraction during prayer, work and even sleep!

I've met many in my life whose creativity causes similar imbalance. Some turn to alcohol or drugs to dull the effect. Me, I "tough it out," letting the words pour forth like a fountain until the well runs dry. It is a bizarre commingling of pain and joy, agony and ecstasy — as the tale of Michelangelo, The Agony and the Ecstasy, by Irving Stone relates. That genius couldn't refrain from sculpting, or painting. Even when he did take chisel or brush in hand, the images manifested by his hands were wrought in spite of an enduring anguish that they would never meet his expectations.

Having an understanding of these issues doesn't always lead to a resolution but my hope is that, when 2024 comes to a close, I'll have made a bit of progress on a spiritual journey that never ends.