Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



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I have noticed a number of reflections I've been reading for Lent this year that speak about going beyond giving up chocolate or coffee, as though we've all moved past

that. As though we are all in a different space. As though there is a right way to do Lent, or that there is a medal to be earned for the best Lenten practice.

But have we moved past that? Who is that "we"?

How might that read to someone whose Lenten sacrifice of caffeine is challenging and helps them grow closer to God? Perhaps that sacrifice might help them turn that offering outward into almsgiving, prayer, or, well, fasting.

I looked at the first reading from Genesis (37:3-4, 12-13a, 17b-28a) for today (March 21) about Joseph with his father's gift of a (one could assume, astounding, multicolor-dream-themed) coat and his gift of dream interpretation.

When the readings for the day are about people trying to kill, whether it's the landowner's son or their brother, it's hard to stomach. And it should be hard to stomach — just as it is awful to witness that violence on the news or in our neighborhoods. When I looked at these readings, I must admit, I looked at that anger in fear because it reflects so much of the fear, anger and violence we see each and every day.

I look at his brothers, who went about their days knowing they weren't their father's favorite — what with their lack of dyes in their clothing and their gift — or perhaps they felt their burden of labor. Those differences in attention and values that these siblings experienced led to violence harbored in the hearts of Reuben and the rest of the brothers.

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Now, I'm certainly not suggesting that violence is going to break out because we are criticizing one another's Lenten practices. What I can say is that in a time marked by oh so many divisions, perhaps we are being called forward to act with curiosity rather than leading with assumptions.

We might just be surprised to find out what led a person to choose their Lenten practice. We can encourage them and, if appropriate, seek encouragement in return for our chosen Lenten practices, whatever those might be.

I often think about the viral videos comparing medal-earning gymnastic events in the 1970s to those with today's gymnasts. While the gymnasts in the '70s are incredibly athletic in their own right and certainly competing in events I could never qualify for, the events of today are, I believe, simply meant for those athletes who have figured out how to fly, much less defy gravity. We know it is because of the evolution of sport. Even though the sport has evolved, my ability to perform a back handspring remains nonexistent.

Let us turn that to the gifts that we have fostered in religious life. We have asked to grow in our faith and our relationship with God, and there's no religious sister or brother I've ever met who has told me that they decided to stop growing in their relationship with God. We cultivate the space, we create areas of formation for contemplative prayer — religious life has evolved, and for some of us, that means that our practices around Lent will ebb and flow throughout the seasons of life.

I think we are being invited to support our sisters and brothers with whom we share pews, offices, and transit seats, whether their Lent is on its way toward a cartwheel or a triple axel (I guess that's a different sport — you get it, though!) Let us encourage each other through this Lent and remind each other that Lent isn't about getting it perfect but about slogging through and standing up again and again in our practices (not our "perfects").

As Lent is a season of preparation and we are all called to do the preparation that we are being invited to, let us walk with one another, as this is not a season for competition! I'm reminded of a comedy sketch featuring Quinta Brunson, where she plays an Olympic skier who gets the silver medal. When asked if she was disappointed, she replies, "I did everything as I expected to, and I came in second!"

I am hoping that this Easter I will rejoice in the development of my relationship with God and community. And I hope that I will be a loving companion to the best of my ability to all those I am blessed to support on their personal pilgrimage. May our Lent bring us closer to God through trials and triumphs alike. Let us love and be reflections of God's love.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.