

Danville News Column  
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"The Belly Test"  
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When do you know it is time to fast? When your phlebotomist withdraws cream filling instead of blood. When your Prius gets only 5 miles per gallon. When you need a beach towel to wrap around your waist after you waddle out of the shower. When you're sunbathing at the beach and hordes of volunteers gather around you and try to shove you back into the water. Last, you know it is time to fast whenever something else controls you. If you cannot give it up, it owns you.

We Presbyterians basically ignore this whole liturgical calendar thing, but maybe we can appreciate this tradition of Lenten sacrifice. There is virtue in fasting (so I'm told). Cleansing the body while proving we can hold firmly to a discipline.

I recently received the gift of a Japanese wall-hanging. It depicts a Confucius-like figure holding a pomegranate toward a monkey. Since I cannot read Japanese, I researched what this painting might represent. From Japan to India, prevalent is the concept of the 'monkey mentality,' inspired by the frantic, frenetic, greedy ways monkeys dart about devouring as much fruit as possible. The wall-hanging illustrates a teacher training us monkeys to discipline our grasping natures. I might just hang it in my kitchen.

So, with Lent around the corner, I'm trying to figure out what I need to do to suppress my own monkey mentality. Which unhealthy personal habits ought I change? Which junk food in my life ought I give up? Perhaps I need to abstain from far more than chocolate or booze. How about a credit card fast? Or a television fast (reading more instead)? Or fast food fasts? Or a gasoline fast (walking to work more)? Life always is richer by subtraction than addition.

But wait a minute now. We've talked about monkeys, how about geese and ganders? If we regular folks are going to commit to fasting, to this healthier life of stoicism and asceticism, shouldn't we expect the same from the Brahmins, Bureaucrats, and Bankers?

After all, if the government is going to expect firefighters, police, teachers, to sacrifice and chip in on their pensions and medical insurance (along with giving up their legal rights) what are the legislators going to sacrifice? What in God's name is our government doing spending money on casinos, lotteries, or helping build sport stadiums in cities for overpaid entertainers called athletes? If it isn't free to the public, such as museums or libraries, what in heaven's name is government doing building these monuments to ego and privilege. When life is scarce, when life requires a balancing act between famine and food, we simply lack the carrying capacity to support these civic drunkards and gluttons, those who suck up resources without giving much back. You might wish to note that the tax burden was higher under Reagan than it now is under Obama.

Can anybody tell me why somebody who can dribble a soccer ball or hit a fast ball (or their agents) should be making more money than an elementary school teacher? How dare our Commonwealth hire state troopers to protect casinos and fail to invest in our social infrastructure.

Consider state schools today. We talk about the need for a more educated workforce but it's harder today to get into state or county schools. Yet these are the schools most of us can afford. Who can pony up \$200,000 to attend Bucknell? 33% of lower-middle income family earnings go toward education costs, an increase in 10% in ten years. At an excellent state school in Binghamton, 34,000 applied for 2,800 slots. If you do enroll, given cut backs, good luck registering for the course you need for your degree.

Ought Banks practice a Lenten fast? Sure. They can start with credit cards, the Spawn of Satan. Who at corporate headquarters invents these nefarious ways of stuffing credit cards into the wallets of the poor? What happened to means testing? How come the richest folk get the lowest interest rates while those fighting the tar baby of debt get hit with interest rates that make the Mafia look like Mary Poppins.

Should our Brahmin rich fast? When is enough enough for you? Who among you will have the faithfulness and responsibility, the courage and decency to say no to the next raise or obscene bonus or golden parachute?

The belly, wise teachers say, is the first test. If we can control our appetites, then we just might have a chance on handling the rest.