



LENT: How to Give up Stuff and still be Really Happy

by Jonnie Garstka

When I was a kid, things were different. The air was fresher, pleasures were simpler and Lent was much, much harder to live through.

I'll give you the air. We lived seven miles from town and it was a small town at that. Country air is still cleaner, even now.

Pleasures, maybe I mean expectations, were easier to live up to. We would form clubs that would keep us busy all summer. One of our more long-standing efforts was the Buddy-Buddy-Pal Club. We took half the ping-pong table from Moe's room and nailed it to one of the apple trees and for an entire summer waged war on the other kids in the neighborhood; ate meals in leafy privacy and escaped to a world where we were kings.

My kids have a hard time understanding the fierce pride and pleasure we derived from this.

As for Lent, my mother was really into Lent. She felt self-sacrifice was an excellent way for us to become better children and thus closer to God. To her mind, forty days of doing without was a small price to pay for the spiritual rewards we would reap.

On paper it worked. We gave up our soda and candy and television. For the whole of Lent we did without. But what we really did was stash away hoards of the forbidden fruit. I had a secret hiding place for the soda I was not drinking. Sandie kept her candy in a shoebox in our closet. Mike had bags and bags of cookies in his bottom drawer. Each of us saved up for the glorious day to come, Easter.

Now, just because I gave up soda didn't mean I couldn't have candy, or cookies. So I would raid Sandie's candy cache and Mike's cookie drawer. They, too, were free to hit on my soda depot. We couldn't complain to our mom because she thought we were obeying the letter AND the spirit of the law.

The Church of the new millennium feels that its approach to Lent has been too "negative." Now its thrust is more toward positive acts of faith and love. You would think this would make me, the soda lord, feel happy and vindicated.

Not so.

If I had to give up my favorite things for Lent, my kids are going to have to, too. It's going to be a good Lent. I know all of their hiding places.

No Woman Is an Island

by Jonnie Gartska

Business trips are not my idea of a fun time. In fact, they're right up there with liver on the list of things I can do

without.

Last week, Paul went on a business trip. I stayed home with the kids and Jay Leno. For some reason, I can't seem to sleep when Paul is away. It's not that I'm afraid – it's just that I develop an amazing awareness of everything that lives and breathes within a two-mile radius of my home.

Usually, I fill the sleepless hours with wild cleaning binges. I vacuum and polish and dust. I rearrange closets. I iron clothes I hate and never wear. Then I iron clothes the kids hate and never wear.

I miss him. The kids miss him. And I always mean to tell him so.

But when he walks in the door, the adrenaline, which has kept me on a Mister Clean high for five nights, drains away, leaving me yawning hugely into the back of my hand just before I kiss him hello.

Fortunately, the kids cover for me, jumping all over him, half carrying, half dragging his bags into the house, nattering about all the things that happened while he was away.

Business trips of some sort have always been part of a working person's job. But when they become a part of my job and I'm not even in California or on the trip, I resent it.

I'm also resentful of the feelings of inadequacy they foster. Who wants to know that she is one of the people John Donne wrote about? It seems as though I've always known that "No man is an island." But "No woman is an island"...? I hate it.

Jonnie Garstka lives in Brewster with her husband, a golden retriever puppy named Bridget, and a 16-year-old cat called Sam.

A former humor columnist, she is now working on her memoir, tentatively titled "I Started out as a Middle Child but I'm Working My Way Up".

You can email Jonnie at: jonnigarstka@gmail.com