

“*The body of Christ, broken for you...*” My palms sweat and jaw clinched as I shuffled forward — the wayfaring anorexic amidst a line of worthy-Christian worshippers.

“*The body of Christ, broken for you.*” The aroma of freshly-baked bread intensified as the ritual continued, teasing at my starved soul and stomach while the stream of impervious parishioners partook in a *common-meal* of salvation. I stepped up to the plate.

“*The carbohydrates of Christ, but not for you, the broken.*” It’s amazing how mental illness can manipulate a message. Needless to say, those stigmatic words stabbed me like a nail in the hand that I used to break off the most minuscule *crumb of Christ* that could be broken. I bowed my head — an outward portrayal of piety and prayerfulness, but inwardly, an acknowledgment of my deeply-rooted ascetic inclination towards self-impoverishment and starvation.

“*The blood of Christ, shed for you.*” A wave of jealousy washed over me as I turned to watch the devoted disciples dip their freshly-broken bread and delight in the taste of grape-flavored grace.

“*The blood of Christ, shed for you.*” I rehearsed the move in my mind in awareness that the Welches which awaited me would add a layer of complexity to my *communion-connivery*. I’d need to stir the cup’s surface enough to appease the unassuming elder, but not so much as to allow the bread to soak up any blood-shaded sugar-water. I stepped up to the cup.

“*The burden of the Cross, bestowed upon you.*” Another nail stabbed at my soul, causing me to cringe as I skimmed the surface of the juice with my bread-shielding finger, before pretending to put the dry crumb in my mouth. Again, I bowed my head; not in prayer that I be filled with the spirit of the living Christ, represented by the elements, but that no was watching as I slipped his blood-less body into my pocket. Tears formed in my eyes and guilt (not bread, body, blood nor wine) filled my grace-starved stomach as I sauntered back to my seat — alone and empty, amidst a *commun-ity* of faithfully-fulfilled Christians.

The voice which *blessed* that loaf of glutenous-gluttony and consecrated the cup of calories that Sunday morning was not of either elder, nor Christ, of whom they quoted; but an old acquaintance, or adversary, of mine whom I refer to as *Ed*. *Ed* is not a common Biblical epithet, nor representative of any ancient saint, mystic or martyr — *Ed* is actually an acronym for my *Eating Disorder* and the personification of my misguided quest for piety through self-punishment. However, *Ed* is more than a personal pal, *he* just so happens to be the most deadly of mental illnesses and February is National Eating Disorder Awareness month. What’s more, despite his growing popularity in contemporary culture, *Ed’s* origins extend far beyond the mirrors, scales and magazine photos of superficial society — and deep into the age of antiquity.

Ed first came to visit me at age seven, around the time that my father’s colon cancer diagnosis stole my sense of security and childhood innocence. Given that my spiritual foundation at that age consisted of the two-or-so Sunday school classes that my ‘recovering Catholic’ mother would send me to each the year, faith seemed a pretty flippant base of support. And as for God? Well, he or she had yet to prove a reliable or relatable ally. So, what did I do? I turned to things that I could control in order to regulate the array emotions that I was experiencing, but didn’t understand. Food and exercise.

Throughout the five years spanning my father’s diagnosis and death, *Ed* taught me many valuable lessons. I learned how to starve off inner-guilt by skipping meals and exhaust away obtrusive anxiety by running laps around the yard until my legs gave out. It was also during this time that I was introduced to another individual of intrigue, via our school’s Young Life program, whose life seemed to support my self-deprecating practices. However, it wasn’t the teachings, miracle-workings or divine identity of this sandal-clad rabbi that drew me in. It was his suffering, and that was when *Ed* got ecclesiastical. *Holy Anorexia*, or the “miraculous lack of appetite” known as *Anorexia Mirabilis*, was a prevalent phenomenon of the Middle Ages in which mystics, mostly Catholic females, sought out physical experiences of *Imitatio Christi*, “opportunities to suffer like Christ,” a based on the belief that pain allowed them to participate in the passion of Christ and salvation of the world. This isn’t distinct to the Christian tradition, these mystics align well with the bodhisattva’s of Buddhism, who delay Nirvana so to participate in the suffering of the world... Jesus being a prime example.

I can still feel the *holy* feeling of lightness and freedom that came with skipping lunch in response to learning of Jesus’ fast in the desert. I remember loathing the image of the middle-class white male that met me in the mirror while reading about Jesus’s *love of the least of these* — the guilt-ridden reflection of *privilege* that poured out from our home’s overstuffed pantries and continues to speak to me through

messages such as the Black Lives Matter mantras of the present day. I remember how films about Christ's death on the cross motivated me to weave my own crown of thorns and seek suffering instead of salvation. Unfortunately, what I failed to grasp through those stories of persecution and compassion was what all the fasting, suffering and selflessness — seen in the Jesus's, Buddhas, Gandis and so forth who have suffered to promote self-love and spiritual resilience — represented. This inclination to carry the cross instead of embrace it's message of forgiveness was in large part due to my eternal indebtedness to another of *Ed's* faithful friends, a false-prophet named *penance*, who pushed me into a stent of atheism and isolation.

Paying penance through self-punishment was a prominent practice of *starving saints* and mystics such as St. Clare of Assisi, Julian of Norwich and the St. Catherine of Siena — women whose view of grace was clouded by a lens of guilt, instead of clarified by one gratitude.

“Penance should be but the means to increase virtue,” wrote St. Catherine, an exalted ascetic whose devotion to self-starvation resulted in her premature death at the age of 33.¹ This was a belief shared by groups such as the *Poor Clare* covenant of St. Clarissa, an austere women's order of the Roman Catholic Church who demonstrated their devotion to prayer, penance, and contemplation through intensive isolation, fasting and various other severe austerities.

But should this Medieval mystical inclination towards suffering really come as a surprise, given writings such Nietzsche who claimed, “pain and suffering are the key to all windows, without them, there is no way of life,” or the Apostle Paul's who wrote to the Roman Church, “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope.”² Paul's was a *hope* of which Pope Francis' alluded to some 2000 years later upon asking a group of Jesuit students: “How [we] can become a little poorer in order to be more like Jesus, the poor Teacher? Where can [we] find hope? ... In the poor Jesus,” he answered his own question after a brief silence. “[Because] poverty calls us to sow hope.”³

Thus, maybe our question is *why some seek suffering while others celebrate that our spiritual predecessors suffered so that we wouldn't have to? Why do some find fulfillment in fasting while others claim comfort communal meals?* Maybe the answer is hidden in the Pope's call to hope — or, quite possibly, our response to losing it. When listening to the news and reading the headlines, it is quite apparent that we live in a broken world. And *brokenness* is not a far cry from *hopelessness*. The anorexic-inclined ascetic of antiquity to the present often responds to this brokenness by seeking ways to break themselves, instead of heeding our spiritual duty to love the *the broken* whole again.

As we inch towards spring, Christians around the world are currently acknowledging a time of *Lent* — a reflection of Jesus' 40 day fast in the wilderness traditionally rooted in the tenets of fasting, almsgiving and prayer. But Lent, Ramadan, or the Buddhist's Danjiki are not times to dwell on the brokenness of the world, but a time to reflect on our response to it. These periods of spiritual fasts are times to feast on faith, forgiveness and fellowship — regardless of faith tradition or our food consumption/restriction practices. These festivals and fasts supposed to be reminders to love and accept ourselves and share in the abundance we have, not instead of pay penance for our perceived privilege through self-punishment. Spiritual fasting is far from starvation, and almsgiving is about abundance, not impoverishment.

There is another side to the extreme fasting and exertion practices of past and present mystics — whether the Christian Gnostics, Islamic Sufis, or Jewish Kabbalists. Whereas the anorexic-ascetic seeks purification and piety through self-starvation, the mystic uses starvation or self-punishment to induce physical experience of *mysterium tremendum*, or union with the divine. Take the Medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, for example. Julian's quest for a divine encounter pushed her to pray for a *threefold favor* of suffrage from God: That she behold the crucifixion in comprehension of Christ's suffering and compassion, that she be made deathly ill to the point that she'd be purged of herself and able to live fully

¹ Catherine of Siena, The Dialogue of Saint Catherine of Siena

² Romans 5:3-5

in Christ, and that God grant her the three wounds of compassion, contrition and willful longing so that she might experience union with the divine.

Well these *favours* were granted to Julian; however, the God she recounted was very different from the one whom she expected. Her union was an experience of love, not wrath, that mimics the message received by another mystic — Meister Eckhart, whose parallel path for holiness was depicted, not by *three favours*, but three rungs on a ladder: purgation, illumination, and union. What Meister came to realize was that one cannot, or needn't, initiate a union with the divine — whether through starvation, exertion or any other means of self-induced suffering. This union is already a given. One simply has to do the thing that is often the most difficult for the anorexic-inclined ascetic. It is the same thing that the Eucharist meal that started this writing and my personal journey towards spiritual and self-acceptance reiterated. That we enjoy the divine union that is awaiting us when we chose to accept it! So let this season be a time in which gratitude reigns over guilt during which every *crumb* we consume nourishes our soul and unites us as one with the divine love of the universe.