

Chocolate and Ashes

by Laura Alary



Lent will be launched in an unusual way this year. As happens every now and then, Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day. There is something wonderfully absurd about this timing: a celebration of passion and sensual pleasure to kick off a season defined by renunciation and the taming of desire.

Lately I have been amusing myself by composing cards for the occasion:

Roses are red,

Ashes are grey.

I'm giving up chocolate.

It's better that way.

Or perhaps:

My heart burns for you,

you cute little elf.

But I must resist,

or make an ash of myself.

But maybe my laughter is misplaced. Perhaps this apparent collision of opposites points to something less frivolous.

The last time Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day coincided, I puzzled over how to connect them in a way that would make sense to my young children. Finally I bought some wooden hearts, sand paper, and food dye, and created a simple ritual. We read aloud a passage from Ezekiel (36:26) where God's people are promised new hearts and new spirits. We talked about ways we would like to feel new; things we had done for which we were sorry; things we hoped to change. Then we spent some time working on our wooden hearts: sanding the rough edges; tinting them a vivid crimson; polishing them with a homemade concoction of beeswax and olive oil. As we tended to our hearts, we imagined our own hearts being mended, smoothed, cleaned, and made new.

To be honest, I have no idea what my kids took from this exercise. But

for me it was one small step toward finding a new perspective on Lent.

My own experience of this season always emphasized self-denial, sacrifice, and death. As a child, I was terrified by the summons to let go of my life—my very self that was just beginning to form. If following Jesus meant the loss of everything I was and hoped to become, I wanted no part of it.

When I had children of my own, I was determined to find a way to help them see Lent more positively, as a time of renewal and transformation. But I kept stumbling over the language and imagery of laying down one's life. Then a flash of insight came.

I had been reading *Praying in Color* by Sybil MacBeth and was intrigued by her practice of holy doodling. I decided to try it at home. One February evening my children and I gathered around the table by candlelight to draw our prayers. At first there was a restless flood of questions: "Mommy, why are we doing this?" "How do I start?" "Can I paint instead?" But eventually a stillness fell over our little group and fascinating images began to emerge: tangerine bubbles for an aunt who was always cheered by the colour orange; green vines for a grandmother who needed glimpses of new growth in her life; and for a friend dying of a neurological disease, starbursts of yellow crayon drenched with deep

purple watercolors. As we wordlessly held these people in our hearts, we pictured them also held in the heart of God.

Later that evening, as I contemplated what had taken place around the table, I was struck by how the children had naturally settled into silence and become absorbed in their prayers. I loved how their hearts and minds opened up as their awareness of God and others expanded. They had lost themselves in the best possible sense.

Then it hit me. Maybe losing yourself is not about death, but love.

When my first child was born, I struggled with the feeling of being pushed out of the centre of my own life. Suddenly my needs—for sleep, for leisure, for time to think—were shoved to the periphery while this new little person wailed and squawked his endless demands. Sometimes I felt like the person I had been was vanishing. And yet, I loved my child in a way I had not known was possible. Sometimes, as we cuddled skin-to-skin in the dark during nighttime feedings, I had the odd sensation that I did not know where his tiny body ended and mine began.

All forms of love—friendship, romance, humanitarianism, the love that binds parent to child—have the capacity to draw us out of ourselves. True love frees us from the tight orbit of self-absorption and catapults us into a spacious place where there is no longer me and you, and us and them, but only we.

In the words of the Persian poet, Rumi:

*Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing
and right-doing,
there is a field.
I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that
grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase
each other
doesn't make any sense.*

But such love is not painless.

A few months ago a friend shared with me a young adult novel called *Stargirl*. The main character is a non-conformist in the best sense of the word. She plays the ukulele in the cafeteria for anyone who will listen. She attends funerals for complete strangers and grieves wholeheartedly. She writes cards and delivers gifts anonymously. At basketball games,

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she cheers for both teams. Stargirl moves through the world—including the socially stratified world of Mica High School—as if all the cliques and divisions simply do not exist. She feels a sense of kinship to everyone and everything.

The book made me cry. I cried at the sheer beauty of Stargirl—her boundless kindness and ability to see the oneness of things. But I also cried because this way of seeing and the love that flows from it threatens those whose sense of security and self-definition demands that there be an us and them, insiders and outsiders. In the end, Stargirl is misunderstood, despised, and rejected.

Sound familiar?

Jesus does not lay down his life because suffering is a good thing, or because he seeks death and self-destruction as ends in themselves. Rather, he suffers as a consequence of his life of radical love, a love that baffles, threatens, and offends. The death of Jesus is not an isolated event. It is the culmination of an entire life of making room, welcoming the stranger, crossing boundaries, and loving wholeheartedly.

In one sense, my childhood impression of Lent was true. Jesus does call us to follow him, and the places he leads us are not always where we would choose to end up.

Sometimes love hurts. A lot. There are few things as risky as opening yourself up to misunderstanding or

rejection or loss. This kind of vulnerability scares me to my core. But I keep choosing it because deep down I believe that love is the most real thing there

is. It is love that transforms, heals, cleanses, restores, renews, reconciles, forgives, and binds together. Love gives meaning to that which otherwise seems meaningless. Love drags us beyond our egos and makes us better versions of ourselves.

Maybe it is not so strange after all that Lent will begin on Valentine's Day. It's actually a perfect reminder that the pulsing heart of this season is not smug self-denial or rigid asceticism. It is *love*: the divine love that animated the life and ministry of Jesus; the universal love that forms the rich soil from which our particular loves grow; the transforming love that takes our hearts, no matter how shriveled, rough, or broken, and gently makes them new.

So this year as I set off on my forty day journey through the wilderness, I think I will begin by fortifying myself with a really good box of chocolates. That seems like a loving gesture. Besides, something tells me I'm going to need my strength.

