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## Lenten work

*Lent calls us to our rightful mind, to the hard work of dismantling the defenses that divide us from others and that screen out the presence of God, says Marilyn McCord Adams.*

by [Marilyn McCord Adams](#)



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Liturgy assumes that there is a time and a place for everything. Christmas and Easter emphasize celebration. The long, drawn-out Trinity season focuses on what it means to be a Christian day by day, in “ordinary time.”

By contrast, Lent is supposed to be a “crash course” in “getting real” about who God is, who and what we are, and what is at stake between God and us. Lent is not a time for euphemism and vagueness but for confronting stark realities, for deliberately ripping off disguises that keep us from recognizing our need of God and from opening ourselves to God’s saving power.

Conversion aims for nothing less than a fundamental restructuring of personality, a seismic shift from centering on the ego -- *I* do this, *you* do that, that is *yours*, this is *mine* -- to a kind of dialectical identity, which more and more makes who we are and what we do orbit around a lived partnership with Christ.

St. Paul makes this explicit in Galatians 2:20, when he declares: “It is no longer I who live, but it is

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Christ who lives in me.” *I-not-I-but-Christ* do these things. *I-not-I-but-Christ* write these things to you. St. Paul is in travail until Christ is similarly formed in his charges. Likewise, John’s Jesus insists that he does only what the Father wants him to do, says only what the Father wants him to say. John’s Jesus is not saying that God is bossy but signaling that his human personality is centered on his partnership with the Father: *I-not-I-but-the-Father* do these works; *I-not-I-but-the-Father* have this to say.

John’s Jesus promises that the Trinity -- Father, Son and Paraclete -- will come make its home with us, so that we can abide with one another in a kind of mutual coinherence, so that our words and deeds are governed by our entry into divine purposes, so much so that we become and seem to others to be ambassadors speaking and acting on God’s behalf.

Of course, God is omnipresent by nature, living and active at all times and all places. No creature can do anything all by itself. God must act together with it, enabling its action. Human adults enable a human infant to become a person by surrounding it with personal presence, long before the infant has any concept of itself as distinct from others. Likewise, the personal presence of Godhead is the medium in which we live and move and have our being, long before and whether or not we ever come to believe in God at all. Really present Godhead enables us to be persons in countless ways, whether we recognize it or not. Godhead is a very present help in the long process of developing healthy egos competent to negotiate normal obstacles. But Christianity is clear: an ego-centered self is not our ultimate aim.

No! Conversion has a more ambitious goal: a restructuring of personality to center on lived partnership with God. This requires our dependence on and collaboration with God to become more conscious and intentional. God is omnipresent by nature. But so far as lived experience is concerned, even if we are believers, most of us are *spiritually autistic*. We are not able everywhere-and-always to recognize our personal surround as personal. We have a perception disorder that keeps us from reading good things that happen as expressions of God’s love and ghastly things as something that will be made good on within God’s providential plan. The Bible acknowledges that this is the human condition, even -- perhaps especially -- where religious people are concerned. “We see but we do not perceive. We hear but we do not understand.”

The omnipresence of God is not obvious to us, and that keeps us from feeling safe. If God were more obvious, we would know and feel that there is enough love in the universe to go around, that -- come hell or high water, and they certainly *do* come -- God is able and determined to hold us in life forever. But God is not obvious. The environment *seems* hostile; the necessities of life, in short supply. Darwinian animal motivation kicks in. Seeing but not perceiving, hearing but not understanding, we are easily convinced that survival all depends upon us. We readily come to believe that we are entitled to life and the necessities of life, that life is not a gift but a thing to be grasped in Darwinian competition, where only the fittest survive.

Moreover, the circle is vicious. Our inability to experience God’s personal presence *as personal*, the good things of life *as revelations of divine love*, drives us into habits of perceiving the world as dangerous and “out to get us,” as a place that demands a Darwinian approach. We become more ego-centric rather than less.

Lent comes every year to recall us to our rightful mind, to the real hard work of dismantling the defenses that not only set up dividing walls of hostility between us and other human beings but also function as lenses that screen out the presence of God. And so, Lent invites us to self-knowledge and to “works meet for repentance,” to steps toward that radical remodel that will put lived partnership with God at the center of who we are and what we mean.

Lent is a season that brings us back to the work of prayer. Getting to know God is not only the cure for what ails us; it centers the meaning of our lives. God is at the core of our being, willy-nilly. To get to know God, we have to descend into our own depths to chart the lay of the land, to identify and name our Darwinian habits that bend us out of shape. What we find will furnish ample material, not only for confession, but for conversation. Lent is a time for candor, when we recognize for ourselves and share with God our deepest fears and twisted suspicions, our timid hopes and wildest dreams.

Lent is also a time for beginning to break bad habits. Some of these are within our power. With discipline, we can back ourselves out of them and leave them behind. More deeply rooted are our addictions to “painkillers” -- to sweets, junk food and alcohol; to conspicuous consumption, workaholic achievement, competitive advantage and privileged access -- that distract us from facing

wounds that we fear are incurable and that keep us from exposing them to the Great Physician and his healing love. Here we may need to confess our powerlessness to break the bondage and humble ourselves to be coached by others into finding in God the help we need.

Lent is also a time to subvert the old by practicing the new, to stop thinking about volunteering as an ESL tutor, or a jail visitor, or a soup kitchen worker or a Habitat builder, and actually *do* it. Actions speak louder than words, and we can learn by doing how to love those whom Jesus loves.

Medieval theologians thought the human soul of Christ was so centered on Godhead that he enjoyed the beatific vision through his mortal life. For us, the restructuring of personality is a process. Few people come to a point of being everywhere-and-always conscious of the personal presence and goodness that surrounds them. But the courage to “get real” with God about our predicament, our attempts to be present in prayer and to work with God to dismantle our disabling defenses, does slowly shift us into greater transparency.

Our will to collaborate with God will open various layers of the self to deeper intimacy that will more and more convince us that we are safe and that we are loved. This will increasingly free us to see and love the world as God wants us to see and love it. Eventually, repeated year after year, not just seasonally but all year long, Lenten exercises will remold us -- like St. Paul -- into people who can speak and act in God's name.