



## **LENT – HAVE YOU GIVEN UP ON GIVING UP?**

By Susan V. Vogt

A year ago, I was facing Lent – again. Over the years I had gotten into a rhythm of what I usually “gave up” for Lent and was ready to repeat a successful formula – no sweets or complaining, extra prayer, and the usual fasting and abstinence. There’s something about routines, however, that can take the spirit out of even good practices. I was doing good, but not growing or being challenged. This Lent I wanted a practice that would remind me daily of this penitential season and join me with Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice of his life for others.

### The Idea

What if I just gave away one thing a day for the 40 days of Lent? After all, our children were sprung so there really was no longer a need for all those hand-me-downs I had been saving. I wanted to live a simpler lifestyle both for spiritual reasons (Luke 9:3) but also to declutter my life. I decided to take this on as a challenge and a sacrifice – not knowing where giving away one thing a day would lead me, but hoping it would clean out not only my closets but also my heart and soul of unnecessary clutter. This kind of sacrifice may not appeal to, or be appropriate for everyone, but hopefully it will prompt you to consider what you can give up for Lent that will make a difference more than losing a few pounds.

### The Plan:

I decided to start my Lenten give-aways with shoes. I thought this would be relatively easy since I’m not a big collector of shoes – or so I thought. According to Soles4Souls [www.soles4souls.org](http://www.soles4souls.org), the average American owns 13 pairs of shoes. I figured I was probably under that and could go lower. Wrong. When I added up all my shoes (including slippers and boots), it came to 30 pairs. I was horrified! I pruned it down to 13 but I’m not happy being average. In a typical week I only wear 5 pair.

Since I was already perusing our bedroom, I moved on to clothes. I knew I had many clothes that I seldom wore now that I work out of my home. It soon became apparent to me that I had enough extra stuff to give more than one thing away a day and could go by categories. I started with the letter S: shirts, skirts, suits, slacks, sweaters, and scarves and gathered up all the old fashioned, in need of repair, or “makes me look fat” clothes. Typically I had about seven items for each “S” and ended up with breathing room in my closet. I was feeling pretty good about this pruning but ran into a problem.

### Who do I give all this stuff to?

In the interest of economy of time, at first I just collected my intended give-aways in a corner. It didn’t make sense to drive to St. Vincent DePaul every day. But then my stuff started overflowing and getting in the way of life. Could I hold out till the end of Lent? Yes, but I had to create new storage corners. In addition to giving things to charities, neighbors, and friends I discovered FreeCycle, [www.FreeCycle.org](http://www.FreeCycle.org). and Vietnam Vets [www.pickupsforvets.org](http://www.pickupsforvets.org) who come to your home. My most satisfying experience, however, was trying to get rid of an adult

potty seat. It was the one thing not claimed in my neighborhood, “Free Yard Sale.” I saw a woman walking down the street to visit an elderly neighbor. She saw the seat and said, “Hey, the lady I’m visiting could use that!” She picked it up and went on her happy way.

### The Results

- Hardest thing to give-away: Privacy and time. We agreed to have a young homeless family live with us for several weeks when they were in a crisis. It was a leap of faith since we weren’t sure if the weeks would merge into months or a year.
- Most unusual item: Dead pets. I cleared out all the cages and paraphernalia from pets who had died years ago.
- Most awkward experience: Birdie’s supper. On Holy Thursday, I cooked and delivered a meal to a frail member of our parish who I barely knew. It seemed fitting for this day, but I was afraid she might consider it condescending.
- Most humbling: going to confession and giving away my sins.

### Never on Sunday

I harkened back to my early religious training and remembered that Sunday is not an official day of Lent since it is meant to be a day of rest and rejoicing, not penance. I, therefore, decided not to give anything away on Sundays, but rather use the time to ponder life and how this experience was changing me. Was I becoming less attached? Was it a holy sacrifice or simply a way to clean my house?

### What’s all this got to do with Lent and Spirituality?

Just as Jesus was stripped of his clothes before his crucifixion, I found myself stripping away excess clothes and household items to focus on what is most important in life – being generous, not being full of myself, caring for those in need. Sometimes it was hard to give away a particular item because of sentimental attachment or the thought that one of our kids, might want it some day. One of my blog readers helped me with this by suggesting that I take a photo of trophies or memorabilia. Another reader reminded me that while I’m waiting for a grandchild to grow into a snowsuit, another child might be shivering right now.

### How has it changed me?

Although I haven’t reached a state of total detachment and humility, I do think I stretched myself to think daily about the abundance I already have rather than what I lack. I’m more aware of how to share what I have with others even if it pinches. I remind myself that my importance or value is not dependent on what I own. I feel more solidarity with those who are economically poor. I also find that I shop differently. When tempted to buy something – because it’s such a bargain – I stop and think, “Do I really need this? Is it something I will eventually give away? Is there someone else I can buy it for who needs it more than I do?”

### The Future

As a result of giving stuff away for 40 days, I gained a new habit and attitude and decided to extend this commitment for a full year. Lent was a good way to kick start the process. It has occurred to me that all of this leads very naturally to the final time of letting go – the time of our death. Just as Jesus sacrificed himself for us on the cross, so I can sacrifice some of my time, my goods, my money, and my way of doing things for others. Remember, eventually we all will

return to dust. The stuff we surround ourselves with just collects dust and makes it harder to let go for that final journey.

*Susan Vogt is a freelance speaker and writer on marriage, parenting, and spirituality. See her blog, Living Lightly, [www.SusanVogt.net/blog](http://www.SusanVogt.net/blog) for a day to day account of her give-aways.*