

INTRODUCTION

I looked deeply into Diane’s eyes. “Three weeks ago, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer,” she said. “It has spread to my liver and spleen.” I held her hand as we talked about her life and what mattered most—her husband, children, grandchildren, and her relationship with God. She said, “I have to make room for life and give today a chance.”

Her words echo over and over in my mind. Many of us have lives that are busy and hectic—lots of motion and repetition with very little meaning. We’re constantly on our way to the next place, seldom taking a moment to soak in life.

As with Diane, we will all have days when we’re neck-deep in tough times: friends who forget us, spouses who complain, pressures that surface, creditors calling, and then, those awful days when the cemetery dirt is still fresh.

To bring meaning, happiness, and purpose back into our lives, we must let go of our attachment to other people’s opinions, our learned behaviors, our self-doubts, and our poor self-images. These keep us from living the rich, meaningful, and exciting lives that we truly deserve.

Lent is a prime time to make room for life and give every day a chance. Again, like Diane, when we prepare to leave this world, we want to be at peace and know that we’ve made a difference. I offer the following practical and motivating reflections to help you realign your priorities and uncover a real and understandable approach to daily living.

I offer suggestions about “how to” and “what to” pursue, so that you can bring the results into your life and finally set free the person you are deep inside. My hope is that you will also discover a new spring to your step, recognize your magnificence, and find new meaning in your relationship with God.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS, a Division of Bayard, Inc.

977 Hartford Turnpike Unit A, Waterford, CT 06385

(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411; www.twentythirdpublications.com

Copyright © 2023 Estate of Rev. Joseph F. Sica; 1606 Summit Pointe, Scranton, PA 08508.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. Write to the Permissions Editor.

ISBN 978-1-62785-731-4 • Cover image: [©stock.adobe.com](https://stock.adobe.com) / Kalawin • Printed in the U.S.A.

Be Grateful

Whiners and naysayers are all around us! For them, the weather is too warm or too cold, the boss is a jerk, and the food is lousy. No matter how good things are, they see only the bad in everything. I invite you to create a complaint-free Lent. This idea is modeled after Maya Angelou's comment, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain."

Embracing a complaint-free Lent begins when we refocus our lives on gratitude. Most of us tend to concentrate so heavily on what's missing in our lives that we barely perceive the good that counterbalances it. When we open up to gratitude, we see clearly how much good there really is. Those things we are lacking are still there, and we still have shortcomings. But instead of focusing on them, we find something to appreciate. I recently spoke with a woman who could only move around in a wheelchair. She said, "My mind is as sharp as ever. I have something to be grateful for."

Gratitude turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, and confusion into clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, and a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.

Work for the Soul » The challenge is to go forty days without complaining. To aid in your effort, wear a rubber band around your wrist. If you find yourself engaging in complaints, gossip, or criticism, snap it. As the days of Lent pass by, you will find yourself doing less complaining and more appreciating.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, if the only prayer I say is "thank you," that will be enough. Amen.*

*"When
you fast,
do not look
gloomy."*

MT 6:16



Born to Bounce Back

Life goes on. The first time I really understood this was the morning after my father died. I opened my eyes to see another beautiful spring day. Clearly, the earth had turned in the night. The sun was shining. Birds were singing. People were talking in the street. I couldn't believe it, but it was true. Life goes on.

In the face of disappointment, disaster, or grief, life goes on, whether we go on or not. Setbacks come in all shapes and sizes and we don't always handle them with ease. Divorce, bankruptcy, cancer, or the death of a loved one—these events have the capacity to crush us forever. They can also redirect us toward the people and things that matter most. So how do we find that gift of really living after experiencing such setbacks?

Tap into God's healing power! It gives us the ability to get back up after we've been knocked off our feet. When life throws us a devastating punch, we must express our feelings, deal with our anger or sadness, and face our fears. Once we're in touch with these feelings, with God's help, we can work on releasing them.

Setbacks bring us lessons about life and relationships. If we learn the lesson, we can bounce back and experience stronger personal relationships, clarity about our priorities, and greater personal strength. Then we can find a deeper appreciation for life and emerge from the experience feeling totally alive.

Work for the Soul » Start the day with this bold affirmation: "Go ahead, Life, send me a setback. I eat setbacks for breakfast; they are my fuel for the day!"

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, every now and then life will throw a punch at me. The more I roll with these punches, the easier it is to bounce back! Help me to roll with them. Amen.*

*"Take up
your cross
daily and
follow me."*

LK 9:23



Take Every Opportunity

Only one mourner showed up at the chapel that day—the seventy-six-year-old daughter of the deceased. “Tell me about your father,” I said. “He must have been a positive man to have lived so long on his own.” “Not really,” she said. “He didn’t know how to love. Now he’s gone and I’m crying for what could have been.” As we walked toward the chapel door, she stopped, placed her hand on the casket and said, “Too late!”

We often don’t appreciate what we have until it’s too late. We leave one job to take on another and then realize how good the old job was. Our kids move away, and we realize how much we miss them. Friends or family members die, and we recognize how precious they were to us.

If we are living with regret, it’s time to enter the “no regret” zone, where we can release, refocus, and realize:

1. Release the past for hasty decisions made, adventures missed, and roads not taken;
2. Refocus on life here and now. Remember, tomorrow is not a promise; we only have today;
3. Realize that we’ll never have those moments that we missed. We may have time left, though, to say, “I’m sorry,” “I love you,” “Thank you,” or “It’s okay.”

*“The days
will come
when the
bridegroom
is taken
away from
them.”*

MT 9:15



Work for the Soul » Don’t put off your dreams for the future. Your “to-do” list might never get done. Right now, no matter what your age, decide who you want to be when you grow up. You have the rest of your life to get it right.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, help me take advantage of opportunities that come my way so that I may have no room for regrets in my life. Amen.*

Label Jars, Not People

When we label others, we obscure their unique content. People who do this have no idea of the negative impact they have on others. Derogatory labels, which are often based on ignorance and fear, paint individuals with the same brush, thus hiding their uniqueness. After years of counseling, I've observed that those who label others and who continue to speak negatively cause the most damage. Wearing blinders, they can only see from a narrow perspective.

Whenever we receive an unflattering label, our barriers immediately go up. The next time others attempt to label you, take a stand. Say, "Knock it off—your labels are destructive and are not welcome here." It may wake them up and rock their world!

I know someone who believed he was inferior because he only had a sixth-grade education. "I have nothing to offer," he'd say, "because I'm uneducated." Others had given him this label. Fortunately, he's gotten over that. Now, he feels free to share wonderful bits of wisdom with others. Before he was powerless. Now he is confident.

So I propose a label-free Lent. Let's all stop labeling others. Jesus erased labels. He looked beyond the outside appearance to help others see their beauty, richness, and the gifts that made them special. Lent gives us the opportunity to do the same. We can overcome labeling by cultivating unconditional love, compassion, and understanding, and then learn to accept others as they really are.

Work for the Soul » Put a large label on a jar with the words: "Label Jars, Not People." During Lent, every time you label someone, drop a quarter into your jar. At the end of Lent, give the money to your parish or a soup kitchen.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, help me to see others as you see them: unique and special. Amen.*

*"Why do
you eat...
with the tax
collectors
and
sinners?"*

LK 5:30



Conquer Your Frustrations

For me, instruction manuals are the ultimate source of frustration. The words: “Assembly Required” cause tightness in my chest and dread in my heart. Life is filled with such emotional triggers: A driver cuts us off on the freeway. A woman darts in front of us at the checkout line. It helps to identify exactly what it is that frustrates us. Many times, we start to blame other non-related things as the source of our frustration and this drains our energy. When we run on depleted energy reserves, we can burn out quickly, and it takes a long time to recover.

Decide to manage your frustrations. Take prayer breaks. Get some exercise. Take a walk. You’ll be surprised at how much more resourceful you’ll be afterward. Once you’ve had time to relax and pray, it will be easier to ask yourself some meaningful questions: What is really important to me? What choices do I have? What is my next step? What is the lesson in this experience?

Frustration is an emotional reaction. It doesn’t happen “out there.” It happens inside and we can choose to entertain it or not. Ninety percent of overcoming the problem is our conscious awareness that it exists. Ask yourself: Three years from now, will this situation be worth the anxiety? Chances are, it won’t.

Being able to manage frustration allows us to remain happy and positive even under the most difficult circumstances.

Work for the Soul » Share your frustrations with an accountability partner. You’ll feel better when you speak your mind and find out that the other person may have had a similar experience. He or she could have a helpful suggestion you haven’t thought of.

Words from the Heart » *Jesus, please help me accept frustration without getting my buttons pushed. Help me trust you in every situation. Amen.*

“Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.”

MT 4:8



I Feel Your Pain

“Put yourself in my shoes.” It’s a familiar request. We say it because we believe that others do not understand how we feel. We’d like for them to identify with us. Empathy is the capacity to understand the feelings of another. It’s a special human quality that allows us to step outside of ourselves and see another person from within. Often words are not necessary. Feelings are expressed even when we don’t have the ability to describe them.

The realization that, “I, too, may be there one day,” is a splendid teacher of empathy. Surely, we can foresee a time when we will face similar obstacles: a negative report from our doctor, an unexpected decrease in our income, a relationship that dissolves rapidly—all of these necessitate a sudden change in priorities.

There are people—right now—who are going through very difficult times. For some, it’s a real effort to put one foot in front of the other. This Lent we can enter their world, see their pain, and respond with care and compassion. Or, we can do nothing and be like those people who sit in the window of a fancy restaurant, ignoring the faces of the homeless people looking in.

The day will come when we will need someone to put their arms around us, pray for us, ache with us, and say, “I understand. I’ve been there.”

*“I was hungry,
and you gave
me something
to eat; I was
thirsty, and
you gave me
something to
drink; I was
a stranger,
and you invited
me in.”*

MT 25:35



Work for the Soul » Nobody likes a crisis. We don’t know how we’ll respond when it happens, so be prepared. Have your “go to” friend’s speed dial number. When the worst happens, draw strength from God, who will guide you through the chaos and uncertainty.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, in times of trouble, I’m hanging on to you. Better yet, I trust that you’ll be hanging on to me. Amen.*

Forgiveness Heals

Few of us make it through life without being hurt by others. When it happens, our emotions can be overwhelming. At first, we may feel anger and resentment. Justice is what we want! And we want the other person to hurt, too.

Do we get over it or get even? Will we heal from the experience or continue to hate? Letting go is not easy. But if we refuse to forgive, we hurt only ourselves. We're not really punishing the other person. They've moved on.

Even if we manage to say, "I forgive you," our hearts can remain locked in resentment. When we continue to hold hostility toward another, we are chained to that person by an emotional link that's stronger than steel. Forgiveness is the only way to break free.

It's seldom a one-time process. We have to consciously forgive again and again. One moment we may feel that we've let it go. The next moment, something triggers a painful memory that must be dealt with once more. The deeper we hurt, the more time we need to heal. We've got to let go of the bitterness, so that it no longer consumes us.

Work for the Soul » Try a simple experiment. Make a fist and hold it tight. After a few seconds, you'll start to feel the discomfort. Consider what would happen if your fist remained in this position for weeks, months, or even years. That's what happens with bitterness. The tension is always there. You may want to hurt the other person and get even, but almost without exception, the hurt you do to yourself will be even greater.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, help me bury the hatchet forever, truly forgive, and be free. Amen.*

*"For if you
forgive others
for their
transgressions,
your heavenly
Father will
also forgive
you."*

MT 6:14



Choose a Better Life

Take a look at your life. Is it an endless procession of empty days and restless nights? Do you repeatedly make choices that virtually guarantee your unhappiness? If you answered yes (or even maybe) to these questions, I've got news for you. The power to improve your life is in your hands. You can bounce out of bed each morning eager to face another day filled with opportunities for enjoyment, human contact, and personal growth. Just make the decision to change.

Most of us have played some role in not living the life we want. We carry around extra pounds, display destructive patterns, and cling to unhealthy habits. We fail to make the most of our talents, fight with those we care about, and collapse emotionally from upsetting events.

It's our choice. We can choose patterns that defeat ourselves or actions that affirm and honor ourselves. Most people decide to conquer their self-defeating behavior when they hit rock bottom. In the throes of despair, they decide: "No more!"

Practice repetition. Experts say that it takes twenty-one days for a change in behavior to become a habit and a minimum of six months for the practice to become ingrained into your daily life. Begin your positive, affirming habits now.

Work for the Soul » On an index card, write down your self-defeating behavior and the price you pay for engaging in it. List the opportunities you have missed because you chose these actions. Now begin to choose healthier alternatives. Put the index card into an envelope, address it to yourself, and mail it in three weeks. Then, contemplate and marvel at how far you've come.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, I need your help to change my behavior and reclaim my power. I promise to do my part. Amen.*

"They repented at the preaching of Jonah."

LK 11:32



Three Magic Words

A priest was handling a funeral service at a local cemetery. As they were leaving, the husband of the deceased leaned over and hugged the casket. He turned to the priest and said, “Father, I loved my wife.” The priest answered, “I know, Paul. It’s time to leave.” The man paused for a moment, looked longingly at the casket and said, “Father, I really loved my wife, and one day I almost told her so.”

If I could get every person in the world to include three words in their vocabulary, they would be, “I love you.” No other words have as much power to heal or move a relationship forward. These three words are so critical, yet many of us take them for granted. One thing is for certain: no one ever gets tired of hearing them. Without receiving them in a consistent dose, a soul will start to wither. When we express these words, we are saying, “I’m so lucky to have you,” and “You’re the one person on this planet I want to spend my life with.”

The poet W.H. Auden remarked, “We must love one another or die!” He’s so right. Our relationships cannot survive without verbal expressions of love.

The phrase, “there’s no time like the present,” applies here without question. Start now!

Work for the Soul » Try saying “I love you” when it’s least expected. If your spouse is used to hearing you express your love when you leave for work in the morning, call again when you get to the office. Pray, during Lent, that the Lord will increase your love to overflowing. Happy Valentine’s Day!

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, You are always there to catch me when I fall and listen when I need to talk. I love you! Amen.*

*“Ask, and
it will be
given to
you; seek,
and you
will find;
knock, and
it will
be opened
to you.”*

MT 7:7



Resolve to Reconcile

Caroline came to see me three weeks after her father died of a heart attack. She was away when it happened and was devastated by the news. They had a heated argument two days before he died and harsh words had been spoken. She was regretful for things said and unsaid. “What did you argue about? I asked. “Something stupid,” she replied.

Unfinished business can be major, such as a bitter rivalry among siblings, family secrets that were never shared, or important matters that remain unresolved. It could be a child who has not spoken to his or her parents in years, a spouse who dies suddenly during a crisis, or a last will and testament that was never completed.

More often, less dramatic events cause misunderstandings: A mother may still feel guilty about punishing her daughter, a wife may not have forgiven her husband, or a son may believe that his parents loved his brother more. In Caroline’s case, a daughter was disappointed that her father died before they could be reconciled. These memories can be overwhelming for the person left to grieve.

Unfinished business deprives us of a sense of peace. It seems final. We’ve lost our last chance to work through old issues or to tell someone how we really feel.

*“Go first
and be
reconciled
with your
brother, and
then come
and offer
your gift.”*

MT 5:24



Work for the Soul » If you still live with haunting memories, nagging resentments or even anger, consider talking to a trusted friend, priest, or grief counselor so you can process your feelings. Seek to gain closure. Talk it out. Don’t leave things unsaid that need to be said. Resolve to reconcile with your past so you can move on with your life.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, you understand the sorrow of unfinished business. Help me work through mine so I that I may find peace again. Amen.*

Love Your Enemies

It's human nature to want to retaliate when we're attacked or offended. How we respond, however, is a matter of choice. When a spouse betrays, a friend abandons, or an employer cheats, we keep score.

Jesus offered us a different approach: loving our enemies. Can he be serious? Or, are his words meant only for people like Gandhi or Mother Teresa? Love your enemies. That's it! Love them even if it's not easy. Jesus was serious when he gave this command. He knew that it would be difficult for us, yet it is something we must do.

Why? Because our enemies are children of God, just like us. To love our enemies doesn't mean that we should neglect to respect ourselves or that we should allow people to do violence to us or to others. It just means not to harbor hatred in our hearts. Jesus was a perfect example. Even as they crucified him, he loved them.

We have a choice—to hate or to love. With love, we find ways to soothe and slowly heal our wounds. Only love enables us to separate a person from his or her actions. Love is caring and compassionate. It lets go of what was done or said, and helps us understand what motivated the unkind behavior in the first place. With love, we can see the world through the other person's eyes and be free from the anger and revenge that enslave us.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

MT 5:44



Work for the Soul » If you have said or done something offensive to someone, apologize. Ask for forgiveness. Look for opportunities to share a kind word, shake a hand, or offer love.

Words from the Heart » *Dear God, give me great patience and confidence as I attempt to love those who are not very lovable. It isn't easy, but with your help, I can do it. Amen.*