

Dry Fasting at 9

by Milo Art

“Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights. He consumed no food and no water. He told no one. It stayed between him and God. He used oil to hydrate his skin to keep him looking healthy, so that no one would know of his fasting. When the temptations became too much, he went into the mountains, so that not even his closest disciples would find out about his fasting. It was a sacred 40 days and 40 nights for only him and God.”

To prepare us for fasting, we would have dinner at later times and then a few hours later. Then we would skip a meal. Then we would skip eating for a day. Then we would skip drinking during meals. We would get water after we finished eating. Then we would skip eating and drinking for a weekend. Then, I was set. I started my 40-day fast. My grandmother knew about it. She pretended that she didn't, but how could she not? She controlled all of our food and water consumptions. Once, my sister got beat because she was caught eating without my grandmother's approval. Many times, I heard her getting yelled at or shamed for getting midnight snacks even though my sister promised that she didn't. My father didn't know. No one else knew. My school didn't know. I went through the lunch line like regular. I poked around at my food to make it look like I was eating, then threw it away. My friends knew, but they were 9 or 10 too. They just laughed and called me anorexic.

My father found out a few days in. We were at Dairy Queen. He asked what I wanted. I told him that I wasn't hungry or thirsty. I had been repeating that for a few days now. He didn't live with us at the time. My grandmother had guardianship. He pulled me aside and asked why I haven't been eating. I told him, “I can't tell you.” He said, “Oh, are you... fasting?” I stood still and said nothing, looking at the floor. He chuckled nervously and said, “Well you are certainly doing it correctly not telling anyone I guess.” After a pause and telling my grandmother that he wasn't hungry either, he asked about how long I plan to be doing this and how far I'm taking it. I ended up telling him that I plan to do it exactly like Jesus: 40 days, 40 nights, no food, no water, and I meant it fully. He became visibly concerned, “You know Jesus is an angel. He is the son of God. Humans aren't expected to be perfect like him. You can drink water, and you don't have to do it for 40 days. You have already gone much longer than any adult I know, and you are just a child.” “I want to be perfect,” I said with nothing but determination, finally looking up from the ground to make eye contact. “I will do it exactly like the Bible tells me to.” He had nothing more to say. We sat uncomfortably, he ate some fries as I tried to make as little eye contact as possible with anyone or anything, then we left.

The next thing I remember is being in Walmart. This must have been a couple days later. We were grocery shopping with my two siblings, my grandmother, and my father. I remember leaning on the cart because I was very weak. My father asked if I wanted him to carry me. I said no, I'm fine. We were wheeling up by the stack of water cases. They were on a pallet in the middle of the aisle. We were near the front. “Almost done.” “Heading to check out.” I could hear their voices, but my vision was getting blurry. I started seeing black spots. Then, I saw nothing. I woke up fairly quickly I think. It felt like just a moment had past. We were in the same spot, right by the cases of water. I remember my father cradling the top half of me while I reached out to touch the bottle of water suran wrapped in plastic and tucked out of my reach. “Good,” I thought, “It's good that it is wrapped up because it is very tempting.” With this brief haze of wanting water and unable to stand, I also hear my father yelling, “You're killing her!” He was so very very

angry. I felt loved in that moment. My grandmother was upset to though. Love was replaced with shame. I felt like a burden.

At some point, my father tried convincing me again to eat or at least to drink water. He tried to convince me a lot, but I am quite the determined person. He reminded me that Jesus put oil on his skin to stay looking healthy. I told him that I don't care how I look. He said that Jesus also did it to hide his fasting. I was like oh ok. So I soaked my face in water. It felt really nice. I felt alive for the first time in days.

Saturday, while soaking my face which I was doing often now, I fell to temptation. I took a drink of water.... I felt like puking. I felt like dying. I felt like I was going to hell. I felt like everything the Bible says about murderers and rapists being the worst people on earth and that they are going to burn in a firing pit of hell or eternity full of nothing but torture and knowing of teeth and bones. That was going to be me. I was damned... because I took a sip of water at 9 years old dying from dehydration that my grandmother encouraged.

Was I a victim of religious abuse, or was I an idiot child who took religious stories a bit too literal?

Was the educational system and society ignoring signs of child abuse, or were they just ignorant?

Can this be prevented, or am I just a weird case of adverse childhood experience?

Who's to blame? My grandmother? My father? My teachers? The church? Society? The restaurant waitress that joked, "Wow you must be starving kiddo," when my father took us out to 'celebrate' the end of my 10-day fast. I ate two whole rolls and an entire glass of Dr. Pepper before she even handed out all the drinks.

Is my father an enabler or a hero?

Should my grandmother had tried to stop me, or was she old and wise, doing what generations of culture had taught her was best for her family?

Honestly, I don't think I know the answer to any of these questions. Yet, scholars seem to know them all for me... Convenient, I guess.

Edit: Answers

I do think I was a victim of religious abuse. I think the church is to blame. My grandmother and father was a part of a cultural practice that did not condone child fasting. However, the church came in and decided that it was to be a family experience, that even children should be taught about these extreme cultural practices. Whether "fasting" is good or bad is not for me to say.

However, I can say for certain, that starving at such a young child has had life long effects on my health.

I do blame my grandmother for being naive and gullible. She should have tried to stopped me. I do not blame her for being abusive though. I do blame society for being neglectful, I cannot say they aren't ignorant though. I will continue to teach and advocate for change in the training on signs of child abuse and neglect within the educational and medical systems.

As for my father, he is my hero. He tried. You might say, he should have forced me. I'm telling you, there is no way I would have let him. Plus, he is a gentle man. He would never force me. Instead, he found a clever way to get me to invoke my own wisdom. He told me about the part where Jesus rinsed his face. When I said no, he reiterated in a way that would entice me. He knew, or at least hoped, that I would be wise in my own enough to drink before death. When it comes to when it is most important, our wisdom chooses life, if we nurture it well. My father nurtured my wisdom, and that saved me. He even got me to quit the fast only 10 days in. I didn't mention this part, but he did so by standing up in front of the entire church that Sunday and said, "My daughter is fasting. Let's all pray over her." I was confused. He said, "Don't worry. You did nothing wrong. You didn't tell anyone. I did. God will still bless you greatly." So, we prayed. After church he said, "Do you feel blessed?" I said yes but it is still not been 40 days. He said, "Do you think Jesus actually kept count? We only guess how many days. Really, it is just until you get a blessing. The blessing is the most important part." I smiled, and agreed to celebrate the end of my fast. He is a god damn brilliant man.

Can this be prevented? For some, yes. For others, maybe no. It can certainly be limited by not teaching such profound cultural practices in this way to children. We have age limits on sexual content and violence because kids are susceptible and mimic what they see. It may be helpful to also age-restrict cultural practices that could harm children if they mimic them, especially ones that say to not tell anyone. This is incredibly problematic when regulating your young ones. Another way to prevent it, engage in critical thinking, even when it comes to your own culture. I understand how personal it feels to change your cultural practices. It feels like my identity changes everyday since moving to the city. When it comes to practices like this though, even just changing the wording or the delivery could fix the problem. If I was told, "Jesus did this, but no one can be like Jesus" instead of "We should all aim to be like Jesus" I would never have tried it. Or if I was told, "Adults fast" that may have been better. Even that assumes that adults have the rationale to make decisions like this. There could be some adults that fall to the same thoughts I did, or some teenagers that think they are adult enough but are actually still developing and can't handle fasting. There are cultures that do different types of fasting. Maybe it is just dry fasting that should change.

Overall, I feel much better. I am glad I was able to share this experience and answer my own questions. I hope that people listen without making their own assumptions. I am sharing, not teaching.