

March 26, 2017

Lent: A time for slowing

Editor's Note: I'm currently recovering from illness, and can't even summon the words to come up with a witty editor's note. The following is from an earlier edition of the Southwest Kansas Catholic.

I relaxed onto the couch, balanced my bowl of ice cream on my chest, turned on the TV and watched as one skier after another made their Olympic run down a steep, winding slope in a blur of motion -- talent beyond reason, endurance beyond understanding, skill beyond measure.

Meanwhile, I tried and failed to maneuver a spoonful of ice-cream to my mouth without spilling it down my chin.

I've not always been such a couch potato. Watching the Olympics, I recalled the occasion 30 years ago when my brother, Tom, took me skiing for the first time. Tom, an accomplished skier, decided to skip the bunny slope and take me directly to the intermediate slope. This is true, by the way.

Having never been skiing, I wasn't aware that you *wind* down the mountainside to control your speed. Nor did I know that when going fast, one generally bends at the knees to absorb the bumps and help maintain control. So, I went directly down the mountain standing straight up the entire way, as if I were waiting for a bus.

My first thought as I began to speed down the mountain was the acknowledgment that I was skiing. It was a good feeling, as if I were experiencing a sort of rite of passage.

Then I began to accelerate at an uncomfortable rate, which grew more uncomfortable with every second that passed. That's when I had my second thought: "AAAAaaaahhhhhh!!!"

I gasped against the frigid air as it struck my face like an angry Mike Tyson. The icy air bit at my ears, again like Mike Tyson. I zoomed down the mountain faster and faster until the G-forces kicked in and my face took on that weird deflated look that the astronauts get while training in those big centrifuges. It wasn't a pretty picture.

My goggles began to fog up and my world became a strange Twilight Zone-esque landscape filled with trees zipping by, looking like they were really bad water color paintings.

Meanwhile, stunned skiers gazed admiringly at the guy who was flying down the slope like the human cannonball while standing on his skis with the intensity of someone ordering Chinese takeout.

It took only seconds to reach top speed -- not long enough for me to entirely comprehend what was really happening. I looked around as if I was standing still and someone was pushing the earth really, really fast underneath me. The world began to look like that scene in Star Wars when they switch to light speed. For a moment I even considered closing my eyes and focusing--like Luke Skywalker when he blew up the Death Star--but then I decided that the owner of the little restaurant 300 yards below me wouldn't appreciate knowing that the reason I smashed through his front patio window was because I attempted to use the "Force".

I don't know just how fast I was going, but I'm pretty sure I proved Einstein's theory of relativity and went back in time a few minutes. (Or maybe that little bird crawling back into its shell was just scared.)

I peered far below and saw buildings and ski racks and people milling around. There was not a safety net or someone's giant pillow collection in sight.

I decided then and there what I had to do. I began leaning to the left--farther, farther and farther--until I fell completely over and went rolling through the snow, my skis dislodging and heading down the mountain without me.

I lay motionless for a moment, thanking God that I seemed to be unhurt. I propped myself up on my elbows looking like a clumsy abominable snowman. I looked down the mountain and then back up to where I had come from. There was my brother gliding to my side, a look of concern replaced by a huge grin.

The morning after watching the Olympics and recalling my ski trip, I was at the Ash Wednesday Mass when Father mentioned that Lent was a time when we endeavor to come ever closer to Christ.

I couldn't help but call to mind that ski trip again, realizing that for me, Lent isn't so much about fasting, it's about slowing.

A Canadian priest once said that we are "so attentive to everything, that we're deeply attentive to nothing."

It's time for me, this Lent, to slow down, to be still and allow God's voice to permeate through the blur and help me to clearly see the beauty of His creation that is all around me – beauty that surrounds us all, if only we slow down enough to see it.