

Sloth in a bathrobe

Does weariness of the soul make us apathetic toward what is good?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue

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Century illustration (Source image: Fug4s / iStock / Getty)

When I was 14, my after-school and weekend job was to garden for a reclusive 78-year-old woman who lived in a grand Tudor estate. Mrs. Morse never trusted me with a task greater than pulling tiny weeds from endless expanses of pea gravel, so gardening still feels like too celebrated a term for that tedium. After watching my every move for hours through her window, she'd come out at the end with her pocket purse and pay me \$2.50 an hour. I'll never forget the oddity of her wardrobe. No matter what hour of the day, she wore a pastel blue bathrobe with matching

slippers.

Fast-forward four decades to the church I serve where, in my early years here, a retired ER physician ran a drug house across the street. I'd stand for long periods of time in a darkened Sunday school room waiting to snap photos (for the police) of him dealing at the curb. His was a tragic story, sitting on his front stoop day after day, always in a bathrobe, preparing for the next car to pull up.

In 19th-century Russia, wealthy, lazy members of the noble class suffered from what some referred to as the disease of *khalatnost*. A. N. Wilson, in his Tolstoy biography, describes the symptoms of *khalatnost* as "the idleness, the moral inertia, the sense of futility . . . literally the 'dressing-gownness' of those who loll about doing nothing and thinking futile thoughts." A *khalat* was a plush household robe worn by indolent aristocrats.

Ivan Goncharov's 1859 novel *Oblomov* centers around the protagonist's slothful attitude toward life. Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, the son of one of Russia's 19th-century landed gentry, is averse to exertion and indifferent to work. It takes the first 50 pages of the novel for him to move from his bed to a chair. He sleeps long hours and wears a *khalat* whenever he's awake.

The theological word for this indolence or sense of emptiness is *sloth*, one of the seven deadly sins popularized in literature and Christian teaching for millennia. "It is the sin," writes Dorothy Sayers, "that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing . . . enjoys nothing . . . finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing." The word itself sounds pathetic and lazy, perhaps because it is also the name of the sleepy, tree-dwelling species that has the slowest metabolism rate of any nonhibernating mammal in the world.

My interest in sloth is about not the animal but rather the deadness or weariness of soul that can show up in any one of us. Christians who observe Lent consider it a penitential season, which usually connotes calm and deliberate reflectiveness. But what if Lent challenges us to get moving, not to slow or quiet down?

I wonder if our weariness with what's not right in the world sometimes makes us more apathetic toward that which is good. Are we, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, "sad about God's goodness?" Have we become sluggish in spirit with a low thirst for God and a high indifference to that which makes life worth living? It could be that we're not doing all that we should be doing with our lives because of the effort

required.

When Paul criticizes those in the Thessalonian community for “living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (2 Thess. 3:11), he’s challenging them to make something happen. Engage with the world. Stop shaping life into a yawn. Don’t check out with a failure of purpose. Instead of moral inertia, “do not be weary in doing what is right” (3:13).

If God truly cares about what we do with our lives, maybe this Lent is the perfect occasion for you and me to get in touch with our inner sloth.