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Online petitions can be invitations to grace

Mary Ann McGivern | May. 15, 2013 NCR Today

I've gotten my share of letters from Mrs. Abacha in Nigeria, wanting to share her gold bullion with me if only I would send her my bank tracking number. Then as we all got the hang of making requests by email, I, like you, enrolled in MoveOn.org or perhaps NRA.org. Those group email lists opened the floodgates to political parties and candidates and national causes. I even learned to send out my own petitions to cut military spending.

But more recently, petitions on behalf of individuals are running neck-and-neck with calls for political action in my email. They are troubling petitions: to prevent the eviction of a woman with cancer; to prevent the deportation of high school senior; to drop charges against a high school chemistry student whose mistake caused her test tube to explode; to drop a Prada lawsuit against a whistle-blower single mom.

It is painful to read these accounts of human suffering. I open my heart; I click "sign the petition"; I hit "delete" and go on to the next email.

Is this exercise good for my soul? Each small act on behalf of the other is good. I know that. But I fear the easy repetition could callous my heart. On the other hand, the easy "delete" without reading voids the message of meaning. That can't be good.

I give the change in my pocket to people who beg on the street, and I marvel at my power to give or not give. Thinking about it now, I see that I like to be thanked by these strangers. I like the human link. There's no such human link in email. Perhaps I could consider these petitions to be a kind of spiritual practice, making a very limited response to suffering, accepting that I won't feel that human link, letting go of the result.

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