

Doxology: The Anthology

From the "Major Works" series

CJS Hayward

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Questions and contact information: cjshayward.com/contact

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Evangelical Converts Striving to be Orthodox

Anytown, USA. The Parish Council at St. Patrick of Ireland Very Antiochian Very Former Evangelical Orthodox Very Orthodox Very Orthodox Church is working hard to become more Orthodox, in *all* that it means to be Orthodox.

Fr. Joseph explains. "It's part of our Protestant heritage to turn outward in warmth and evangelism. But as an Evangelical Orthodox congregation, we realized that Orthodoxy is the fulness of what we were reaching for, and it's time to free ourselves from our Protestant heritage and become more truly Orthodox. True Orthodox know how to serve and even evangelize—as the monks did in Alaska—while remaining an inward-looking church that extends a rather chilly lack of welcome to visitors. We *can* turn a cold shoulder if we try."

As a result, the Parish Council will be holding a brainstorming session on ways to make the parish less friendly to visitors. The council will be handing out prizes for best ideas, including a thick accent, a long and bushy beard, and a series of motivational tapes on how to have a more lukewarm approach to morals.

Objections were raised in the parish to the effect that there was no Evangelical Orthodox Church in 19th century Russia. 19th century Russia was not available for comment.

Silence: Organic Food for the Soul

We are concerned today about our food,
and that is good:
sweet fruit and honey are truly good and better than raw sugar,
raw sugar not as bad as refined sugar,
refined sugar less wrong than corn syrup,
and corn syrup less vile than Splenda.
But whatever may be said for eating the right foods,
this is nothing compared to the diet we give our soul.

The ancient organic spiritual diet
is simple yet different in its appearances:
those who know its holy stillness
and grasp in their hearts the silence of the holy rhythm,
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,
grasp the spiritual diet by their heart,
by its heart,
by God's heart.

What treasure looks good next to it?
It is said that many would rather be rich and unhappy
than poor and happy,
stranger still than thinking riches will make you happy:
Blessed stillness is a treasure,
and next to this treasure,
gold and technology are but passing shadows,
no better to satisfy hunger than pictures of rich food.

no better to satisfy thirst than a shimmering mirage,
for like the best organic food,
a diet of stillness gives what we deeply hungered for,
but deeply missed even seeking
in our untiring quest to quench our thirst with mirages.

And we have been adept at building mirages:
anything to keep us from stillness.
Perhaps technology, SecondLife or the humble car,
perhaps romance or conversation,
perhaps philosophy or hobbies,
not always bad in themselves,
but always bad when pressed into service
to help us in our flight from silence,
which is to say,
used the only way many of us know how.

There is a mystery,
not so much hard to find as hard to want:
humble yourself and you will be lifted up,
empty yourself and you will be filled;
become still and of a quiet heart,
and you will become home to the Word.

"But my life is hard," you say,
"You might be able to afford luxuries like these,
but I can't."
Take courage.
[Read the lives of the saints,](#)
and find that stillness grows,
not on the path that is spacious and easy to walk,
but the way that is narrow and hard:
strength is not found
in ease and comfort,
but among athletes with no choice but to strive.

We believe in life before death:
we live the life of Heaven here on earth,

and those things in life that seem like Hell
are our stepping stones:
"she shall be saved in childbearing:"
from the politically incorrect Bible.
Can't women have something more equitable?
But the truth is even *more* politically incorrect.

That is how *all of us* are saved:
in suffering and in struggle,
such as God gives us,
and not when dream,
and by our power
we make our dreams come true.

[Weston Price](#) fans,
who say that an ancient diet nourishes
far better than modern foods
manipulated like plastic,
newfangled corn and sunflower oil,
gone rancid then masked by chemical wizardry,
marketed as health food in lieu of wholesome butter,
could be wrong in their words
how we need ancient nourishment and not plastic foods.

They could be wrong about our needs,
but it is a capital mistake to say,
"That may have worked in golden ages,
but we need a diet that will work
for us now in our third millenium."
If [Weston Price's movement](#) is right,
then we need the nourishment of timeless traditions,
now more than ever.
Saying "No, we need something that will work today,"
is like saying, "No, we're very sick,
we are weak and we must focus on essentials:
healthy people may visit a doctor, but not us."

But even if the food we eat matters, and matters much,

the question of what we feed our body
is dwarfed by the question of what we feed our souls,
and over the centuries
our spiritual diet has turned
from something organic and nourishing
to something that might almost be plastic:
inorganic, yet made from what spiritual leaders call rancid.

The right use of technology is in the service of spiritual wisdom,
but the attractive use of technology is to dodge spiritual wisdom,
for one current example,
cell phones and texting not only a way to connect,
but a way to dodge silence,
a way to avoid simply being present to your surroundings,
and this is toxic spiritual food.
Cell phones have good uses,
and some wise people use them,
but the marketing lure of the iPhone and Droid,
is the lure of a bottomless bag:
a bottomless bag of spiritual junk food:
portable entertainment systems,
which is to say,
portable "avoid spiritual work" systems.

Someone has said,
"Orthodoxy is not conservative:
it is radical,"
which is striking but strange politically:
if Orthodoxy is not captured by a Western understanding of
conservatism,
further off the mark is it to try to capture it with any Western idea of
radicalism.
but there is another sense in which it is true:
not in our design to transform the world,
but in God's design to transform us.

I thought I was a man of silence.
I avoid television, occasionally listen to music,

but never as a half-ignored backdrop.
Recently I learned,
by the grace of a God who is radical,
that I did not know the beginning of silence.

"Hesychasm," in the Orthodox term,
described by a rhythm of praying,
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,
in the Church under the authority of a good priest,
an authority for your sake and mine,
is a doorway to strip off layers of noise,
and maybe a portal to joy.
So small-looking on the outside,
and so spacious if you will step in.

Concerned about organized religion?
Eastern Orthodoxy is quite disorganized, some have said,
but we won't go into that.
Negativity about organized religion
is part of the toxic spiritual diet
it is so hard to avoid.
Some have said that people concerned about organized religion
are really concerned about someone else having authority over them.
Though I am self-taught in some things,
an author with a few letters after his name
but not even a high school course in non-academic writing,
Aristotle's words are apropos:
"He who teaches himself has a fool for a master."
There are always choices we must make for ourselves,
Orthodoxy actually having wisdom to help free us in these choices,
but trying to progress spiritually without obedience to a spiritual guide
who can tell you "No,"
is like trying to be healthier without paying attention to stress in your life,
or what you eat, or exercise.
I speak from experience:
I still trip in the light,
but I do not want to go back to how I tripped in the dark.

"Keep your eyes on Jesus,
look full in his wonderful face,
and the things of this world
will grow strangely dim
in the light of his glory and grace,"
says the cherished Protestant hymn:
but it does not say how,
and silence is how.

Do you long for honors the world bestows,
and are never satisfied with what you have?
Mirages look good,
but the place of a mirage is always outside our grasp,
something it looks like we might reach tomorrow,
not something that is open to us right now.
And it is not until we let go of the mirage we want so much
that we see right next to us
a chalice
of living water
that can quench our thirst now.

Pride, lust, anger and remembrance of wrongs, envy, wanting to use
people—
all of these urge us to look away
wanting to quench our thirst on mirages
and blind our eyes
to the chalice
of living water
that we are offered,
and offered here and now.
And it isn't until you rest and taste the waters,
the living waters of the chalice that is always at hand,
that you realize how exhausting it is
to chase after mirages.

The Church prays through the Psalm,
"But I have quieted and calmed my soul,
like a child quieted at its mother's breast,

like a child that is quieted is my soul."
When a child quieted at its mother's breast,
cares melt away,
and to the soul that knows silence,
the silence of Heaven,
for Heaven itself is silent
and true silence is Heavenly,
the things of this world grow strangely dim.

Do you worry? Is it terribly hard
to get all your ducks in a row,
to get yourself to a secure place
where you have prepared for what might happen?
Or does it look like you might lose your job,
if you still have one?

[The Sermon on the Mount](#)

urges people to pray,
"Give us this day our daily bread,"
in an economy
when unlike many homeless in the U.S. today,
it was not obvious to many
where they would get their next meal.
And yet it was this [Sermon on the Mount](#)
that tells us our Heavenly Father will provide for us,
and tells us not to worry:
what we miss
if we find this a bit puzzling,
we who may have bank accounts, insurance, investments
even if they are jeopardized right now,
is that we are like a child with some clay,
trying to satisfy ourselves by making a clay horse,
with clay that never cooperates, never looks right,
and obsessed with clay that is never good enough,
we ignore and maybe fear
the finger tapping us on our shoulder
until with great trepidation we turn,
and listen to the voice say,

"Stop trying so hard. Let it go,"
and follow our father
as he gives us a warhorse.

If you have a bank account, or insurance, or investments,
you may be better at making your clay statue,
better than the people who heard the [Sermon on the Mount](#),
but the Lord says to us as much as them,
"Let your worries be quieted
as you enter silence,"
to give us a warhorse.
And when we let go of taking on God's job,
of taking care of every aspect of our future,
we find that he gives us better than we knew to seek:
if we thirst for worldly honor to make us feel significant,
if we covet luxuries to make us feel better,
and we learn holy silence,
the things of the world grow strangely dim.

People hold on to sin because they think it adorns them.
Repentance is terrifying,
because it seems beforehand
that repentance means you will forever lose some shining part of yourself,
but when you repent,
repentance shows its true nature
as an awakening:
you realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell,"
and, awakened, you grasp Heaven in a new way.

Let go of the mirage of doing God's job of providence,
by your own strength,
and let go of the mirage of getting enough money
to make you happy,
and when you give up this misshapen clay horse,
find a warhorse waiting for you:
God will provide better than you know to ask,
perhaps giving you a great spiritual gift
by showing you you can live without some things,

and this just the outer shell holding spiritual blessings
next to which billions of dollars pale in comparison.
("Who is rich? The person who is content.")
And if like me you are weak and wish you had more honor,
you may taste the living water next to which worldly honor is an elusive
mirage
always shimmering, always luring, and never satisfying, at least not for
long,
and ride the warhorse,
and wonder why you ever thought worldly honor would make you happy.

A saint has said,
that when you work,
seven eights of the real task
is watching the state of your heart
and only one eighth is the official task.
Proverbs likewise tells,
"Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life."
Guard your heart.

"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true,
whatsoever things are honest,
whatsoever things are just,
whatsoever things are pure,
whatsoever things are lovely,
whatsoever things are of good report;
if there be any virtue,
if there be any praise,
think of these things."
What you put before your heart matters.
Your heart will be conformed to whatever you place before it:
a good deal of your spiritual diet
is simply what you place before your mind:
mental images above all else,
"Be careful, little eyes..."

There is a distinction between

where one meets God,
and that which reasons from one thought to another:
to us today, "mind" or "intellect" is that which reasons,
but the Church has long known the heart of the intellect or mind:
where one meets God.

And the poisoning of our spiritual diet
has moved us
from knowing the mind as the heart that meets God
to growing and over-growing that which reasons,
so that it is at the heart of our lives,
in Christians as much as the atheist,
is the secular view of mind,
like psychology,
in its secular flight
from religious knowing
of who the human person is
and what is the heart of the human mind.

Learn to live out of that by which you worship:
drink living water,
because it is exhausting
to chase after mirages
in worrying and scheming
in the part of us which reasons,
that which is only the moon
made to reflect the light
of the sun,
that by which we worship,
the spiritual eye
made for a God who is Light.

"We have a sister,
whose breasts are not grown,
what shall we do for our sister
in the day when she shall be spoken for?
If she be a wall,
we will build on her a palace of silver:
and if she be a door,
we will inclose her with boards of cedar."

In your mind be a garden locked and a fountain sealed

in your mind be a garden locked and a fountain sealed,
that which worships
not forever dispersed,
forever exhausted,
in treating that which reasons
as the heart of your mind:
learn the prayer of the mind in the heart.

The ancient organic spiritual diet is prayer, silence, fasting, liturgy,
giving to the poor, tithing, reading the Bible and the Fathers and saints'
lives, and many other things.
You eat it as you would eat an elephant:
one bite at a time.
Your task today is to eat one day's worth:
tomorrow's concerns are tomorrow's concerns.

Technonomicon: Technology, Nature, Asceticism

1. Many people are concerned today with harmony with nature. And indeed there is quite a lot to living according to nature.
2. But you will not find something that is missing by looking twice as hard in the wrong place, and it matters where one seeks harmony with nature. In monasticism, the man of virtue is the quintessential natural man. And there is something in monasticism that is behind stories of the monk who can approach boar or bear.
3. Being out of harmony with nature is not predominantly a lack of time in forests. There is a deeper root.
4. Exercising is better than living a life without exercise. But there is something missing in a sedentary life with artificially added exercise, after, for centuries, we have worked to avoid the strenuous labor that most people have had to do.
5. It is as if people had worked for centuries to make the perfect picnic and finally found a way to have perfectly green grass at an even height, a climate controlled environment with sunlight and just the right amount of cloud, and many other things. Then people find that something is missing in the perfect picnic, and say that there might be wisdom in the saying, "No picnic is complete without ants." So they carefully engineer a colony of ants to add to the picnic.

6. An exercise program may be sought in terms of harmony with nature: by walking, running, or biking out of doors. Or it may be pursued for physical health for people who do not connect exercise with harmony of nature. But and without concern for "asceticism" (spiritual discipline) or harmony with nature, many people know that complete deliverance from physical effort has some very bad physical effects. Vigorous exercise is part and parcel to the natural condition of man.
7. Here are two different ways of seeking harmony with nature. The second might never consciously ask if life without physical toil is natural, nor whether our natural condition is how we should live, but still recognizes a problem—a little like a child who knows nothing of the medical theory of how burns are bad, but quickly withdraws his hand from a hot stove.
8. But there is a third kind of approach to harmony with nature, besides a sense that we are incomplete without a better connection to the natural world, and a knowledge that our bodies are less healthy if we live sedentary lives, lives without reintroducing physical exertion because the perfectly engineered picnic is more satisfying if a colony of ants is engineered in.
9. This third way is asceticism, and asceticism, which is spiritual discipline or spiritual exercise, moral struggle, and mystical toil, is the natural condition of man.
10. The disciples were joyous because the demons submitted to them in Christ's name, and Christ's answer was: "Do not rejoice that the demons submit to you in my name. Rejoice instead that your names are written in Heaven." The reality of the disciples' names being written in Heaven dwarfed the reality of their power over demons, and in like manner the reality that monks can be so much in harmony with nature that they can safely approach wild bears is dwarfed by the reality that the royal road of asceticism can bring so much harmony with nature that by God's grace people work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

11. The list of spiritual disciplines is open-ended, much like the list of sacraments, but one such list of spiritual disciplines might be prayer, worship, sacrament, service, silence, living simply, fasting, and the spiritual use of hardship. If these do not seem exotic enough for what we expect of spiritual discipline, we might learn that the spiritual disciplines can free us from seeking the exotic in too shallow of a fashion.
12. The Bible was written in an age before our newest technologies, but it says much to the human use of technology, because it says much to the human use of property. If the Sermon on the Mount says, "No man can serve two masters... you cannot serve both God and money," it is strange at best to assume that these words applied when money could buy food, clothing, and livestock but have no relevance to an age when money can also buy the computers and consumer electronics we are infatuated with. If anything, our interest in technology makes the timeless words, "No man can serve two masters" all the more needed in our day.
13. Money can buy everything money can buy and nothing money cannot buy. To seek true glory, or community, or control over all risk from money is a fundamental error, like trying to make a marble statue so lifelike that it actually comes to life. What is so often sought in money is something living, while money itself is something dead, a stone that can appear deceptively lifelike but can never hold the breath of life.
14. In the end, those who look to money to be their servant make it their master. "No man can serve two masters" is much the same truth as one Calvin and Hobbes strip:

Calvin: I had the scariest dream last night. I dreamed that machines took over and made us do their bidding.

Hobbes: That must have been scary!

Calvin: It wa—*holy*, would you look at the time? My TV show is on!

But this problem with technology has been a problem with property and wealth for ages, and it is foolish to believe that all the Scriptural skepticism and unbelief about whether wealth is really all that beneficial to us, are simply irrelevant to modern technology.

15. There was great excitement in the past millenium when, it was believed, the Age of Pisces would draw to a close, and the Age of Aquarius would begin, and this New Age would be an exciting dawn when all we find dreary about the here and now would melt away. Then the Age of Aquarius started, at least officially, but the New Age failed to rescue us from finding the here and now to be dreary. Then there was great excitement as something like 97% of children born after a certain date were born indigo children: children whose auras are indigo rather than a more mundane color. But, unfortunately, this celebrated watershed did not stop the here and now from being miserable. Now there is great hope that in 2012, according to the Mayan "astrological" calendar, another momentous event will take place, perhaps finally delivering us from the here and now. And, presumably, when December 21, 2012 fails to satisfy us, subsequent momentous events will promise to deliver us from a here and now we find unbearable.
16. If we do not try to sate this urge with New Age, we can try to satisfy it with technology: in what seems like aeons past, the advent of radio and movies seemed to change everything and provide an escape from the here and now, an escape into a totally different world. Then, more recently, surfing the net became the ultimate drug-free trip, only it turns out that the web isn't able to save us from finding the here and now miserable after all. For that, apparently, we need SecondLife, or maybe some exciting development down the pike... or, perhaps, we are trying to work out a way to succeed by barking up the wrong lamppost.
17. No technology is permanently exotic.
18. When a Utopian vision dreams of turning the oceans to lemonade, then we have what has been called "a Utopia of spoiled children." It is not a Utopian vision of people being supported in the

difficult ascetical pursuit of virtue and ultimately God, but an aid to arrested development that forever panders to childish desires.

19. Technology need not have the faintest conscious connection with Utopianism, but it can pursue one of the same ends. More specifically, it can be a means to stay in arrested development. What most technology offers is, in the end, a practical way to circumvent asceticism. Technological "progress" often means that up until now, people have lived with a difficult struggle—a struggle that ultimately amounts to asceticism—but now we can simply do without the struggle.
20. Through the wonders of modern technology, we can eat and eat and eat candy all day and not have the candy show up on our waistline: but this does not make us any better, nobler, or wiser than if we could turn the oceans to lemonade. This is an invention from a Utopia of spoiled children.
21. Sweetness is a gift from God, and the sweeter fruit and honey taste, the better the nourishment they give. But there is something amiss in tearing the sweetness away from healthy food, and, not being content with this, to say, "We think that eating is a good thing, and we wish to celebrate everything that is good about it. But, unfortunately, there is biological survival, a holdover from other days: food acts as a nutrient whether you want it or not. But through the wonders of modern science, we can celebrate the goodness of eating while making any effect on the body strictly optional. This is progress!"
22. Statistically, people who switch to artificial sweeteners gain *more* weight. Splenda accomplishes two things: it makes things sweeter without adding calories, and it offers people a way to sever the cord between enjoying sweet taste, and calories entering the body. On spiritual grounds, this is a disturbing idea of how to "support" weight loss. It is like trying to stop people from getting hurt in traffic accidents by adding special "safety" features to some roads so people can drive however they please with impunity, even if they develop habits that will get them *killed* on any other road. What is spiritually unhealthy overflows into poorer health for the body.

People gain more weight eating Splenda, and there are more ways than one that Splenda is unfit for human consumption.

23. The asceticism of fasting is not intended as an ultimate extreme measure for weight loss. That may follow—or may not—but there is something fundamentally deeper going on:

Man does not live by bread alone, and if we let go of certain foods or other pleasures for a time, we are in a better position to grasp what more man lives on than mere food. When we rein in the nourishing food of the body and its delights, we may find ourselves in a better position to take in the nourishing food of the spirit and much deeper spiritual delights.

Fasting pursued wrongly can do us no good, and it is the wisdom of the Orthodox Church to undergo such asceticism under the direction of one's priest or spiritual father. But the core issue in fasting is one that matters some for the body and much more for the spirit.

24. Splenda and contraception are both body-conquering technologies that allow us to conquer part of our embodied nature: that the body takes nourishment from food, and that the greatest natural pleasure has deep fertile potential. And indeed, the technologies we call "space-conquering technologies" might more aptly be titled, "body-conquering technologies," because they are used to conquer our embodied and embedded state as God made it.

25. Today, "everybody knows" that the Orthodox Church, not exactly like the Catholic Church allowing contraceptive timing, allows contraception under certain guidelines, and the Orthodox Church has never defined a formal position on contraception above the level of one's spiritual father. This is due, among other factors, to some influential scholarly spin-doctoring, the academic equivalent of the NBC *Dateline* episode that "proved" that a certain truck had a fire hazard in a 20mph collision by filming a 30mph collision (presented as a 20mph collision) and making sure there was a fiery spectacle by also detonating explosives planted above the truck's gas

tank ([see analysis](#)).

26. St. John Chrysostom wrote,

Where is there murder before birth? You do not even let a prostitute remain only a prostitute, but you make her a murderer as well... Do you see that from drunkenness comes fornication, from fornication adultery, and from adultery murder? Indeed, it is something worse than murder and do not know what to call it; for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you despise the gift of God, and fight with his laws? What is a curse, do you seek it as though it were a blessing?... Do you teach the woman who is given to you for the procreation of offspring to perpetrate killing? In this indifference of the married men there is greater evil filth; for then poisons are prepared, not against the womb of a prostitute, but against your injured wife.

27. The Blessed Augustine devastatingly condemned Natural Family Banning: if procreation is sliced away from marital relations, Augustine says point blank, then true marriage is forbidden. There is no wife, but only a mistress, and if this is not enough, he holds that those who enjoin contraception fall under the full freight of St. Paul's blistering words about forbidding marriage:

Now, the Spirit expressly says that in the last days some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences have been seared with a hot iron: for they forbid marriage and demand avoidance of foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Augustine absolutely did not believe that one can enjoy the good of marriage and treat the blessing of marriage's fertility as a burden and a curse. Such an idea is strange, like trying to celebrate the good of medical care while taking measures to prevent it from improving one's health.

28. Such condemnations stem from the unanimous position of the Church Fathers on contraception.
29. Such words seem strange today, and English Bible translations seem to only refer to contraception once: when God struck Onan dead for "pull and pray." (There are also some condemnations of *pharmakeia* and *pharmakoi*—"medicine men" one would approach for a contraceptive—something that is lost in translation, unfortunately giving the impression that occult sin alone was the issue at stake.)
30. Contraception allows a marriage *à la carte*: it offers some control over pursuing a couple's hopes, together, on terms that they choose without relinquishing control altogether. And the root of this is a deeper answer to St. John Chrysostom's admonition to leave other brothers and sisters to their children as their inheritance rather than mere earthly possessions.

(This was under what would today be considered a third world standard of living, not the first world lifestyle of many people who claim today that they "simply cannot afford any more children"—which reflects not only that they cannot afford to have more children *and retain their expected (entitled?) standard of living for them and their children*, but their priorities once they realize that they may be unable to have both.)

31. Contraception is chosen because it serves a certain way of life: it is not an accident in any way, shape, or form that Planned Parenthood advertises, for both contraception, "Take control of your life!" For whether one plans two children, or four, or none, Planned Parenthood sings the siren song of having your life under your control, or at least as much under control as you can make it, where you choose the terms where you will deal with your children, if and when you want.
32. Marriage and monasticism both help people grow up by helping them to learn being out of control. Marriage may provide the asceticism of minding children and monasticism that of obedience to one's

elder, but these different-sounding activities are aimed at building the same kind of spiritual virtue and power.

33. Counselors offer people, not the help that many of them seek in controlling those they struggle with, but something that is rarely asked: learning to be at peace with letting go of being in control of others, and the unexpected freedom that that brings. Marriage and monasticism, at their best, do not provide a minor adjustment that one manages and is then on top of, but an arena, a spiritual struggle, a training ground in which people live the grace and beauty of the Sermon on the Mount, and are freed from the prison chamber of seeking control and the dank dungeon of living for themselves.
34. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, nor about your body, what you will wear. Isn't there more to life than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than them? And why do you worry about the lilies of the field: how they grow. They neither toil nor spin;" they have joy and peace. The height of technological progress in having pleasure without losing control—in artificial sweeteners, contraceptives and anything else—utterly pales in comparison.
35. Technology is not evil. Many technologies have a right use, but that use is a use to pursue maturity and asceticism, not an aid to living childishly.
36. Wine was created by God as good, and it has a right use. But the man who seeks in wine a way to be happy or a way to drive away his problems has already lost.
37. One classic attitude to wine was not "We forbid drinking wine," or even "It would be better not to drink wine at all, but a little bit does not do too much damage," but goes beyond saying, "The pleasure of wine was given by God as good" to saying: "Wine is an important training ground to learn the asceticism of moderation, and learn a lesson that cannot be escaped: we are not obligated to learn

moderation in wine, but if we do not drink wine, we still need moderation in work, play, eating, and everything else, and many of us would do well to grow up in asceticism in the training arena of enjoying wine and be better prepared for other areas of life where the need for the asceticism of moderation, of saying 'when' and drawing limits, is not only something we *should not* dodge: it is something we *can never* escape."

38. The ascetical use of technology is like the ascetical use of wine. It is pursued out of maturity, and as a support to maturity. It is not pursued out of childishness, nor as a support to childishness. And it should never be the center of gravity in our lives. (Drinking becomes a problem more or less when it becomes the focus of a person's life and pursuits.)
39. The Harvard business study behind [Good to Great](#) found that the most effective companies often made pioneering use of technology, but technology was never the center of the picture: however many news stories might be printed about how they used technologies, few of the CEOs mentioned technology at all when they discussed their company's success, and none of them ascribed all that much importance to even their best technology. Transformed companies—companies selected in a study of all publicly traded U.S. companies whose astonishing stock history began to improve and then outperformed the market by something like a factor of three, sustained for fifteen years straight—didn't think technology was all that important, not even technologies their people pioneered. They focused on something more significant.
40. [Good to Great](#) leadership saw their companies' success in terms of people.
41. There were other finds, including that the most effective CEOs were not celebrity rockstars in the limelight, but humble servant leaders living for something beyond themselves. In a study about what best achieves what greed wants, not even one of the top executives followed a mercenary creed of ruthless greed and self-advancement.

42. If people, not technology, make businesses tremendously profitable, then perhaps people who want more than profit also need something beyond technology in order to reach the spiritual riches and treasures in Heaven that we were made for.
43. The right use of technology comes out of asceticism and is therefore according to nature.
44. In Robert Heinlein's science fiction classic [Stranger in a Strange Land](#), a "man" with human genes who starts with an entirely Martian heritage as his culture and tradition, comes to say, "Happiness is a matter of functioning the way a human being was organized to function... but the words in English are a mere tautology, empty. In Martian they are a complete set of working instructions." The insight is true, but takes shape in a way that completely cuts against the grain of [Stranger in a Strange Land](#).
45. One most immediate example is that the science fiction vision is of an ideal of a community of "water brothers" who painstakingly root out natural jealousy and modesty, and establish free love within their circle: such, the story would have it, provides optimal human happiness. As compellingly as it may be written into the story, one may bring up studies which sought to find out which of the sexualities they wished to promote provided the greatest pleasure and satisfaction, and found to their astonishment and chagrin that the greatest satisfaction comes, not from any creative quest for the ultimate thrill, but from something they despised as a completely unacceptable *perversion*: a husband and wife, chaste before the wedding and faithful after, working to become one for as long as they both shall live, and perhaps even grateful for the fruitfulness of their love. Perhaps such an arrangement offers greater satisfaction than trying to "push the envelope" of adventuresome arrangements precisely *because* it is "functioning the way a human being was organized to function."
46. People only seek the ultimate exotic thrill when they are unhappy. Gnosticism is a spiritual porn whose sizzle entices people who despair: its "good news" of an escape from the miserable here

and now is "good news" as misery would want it. Today's Gnosticism may rarely teach, as did earlier Gnostic honesty, that our world could not be the good creation of the ultimately good God, but holding that we need to escape our miserable world was as deep in ancient Gnostics' bones as an alcoholic experiences that our miserable world needs to be medicated by drunkenness. Baudelaire said, in the nineteenth century: "Keep getting drunk! Whether with wine, or with poetry, or with virtue, as you please, keep getting drunk," in a poem about medicating what might be a miserable existence. Today he might have said, "Keep getting drunk! Whether with New Age, or with the endless virtual realities of SecondWife, or with the ultimate Viagra-powered thrill, as you please, keep getting drunk!"

47. What SecondLife—or rather SecondWife—offers is the apparent opportunity to have an alternative to a here and now one is not satisfied with. Presumably there are merits to this alternate reality: some uses are no more a means to escape the here and now than a mainstream business's website, or phoning ahead to make a reservation at a restaurant. But SecondWife draws people with an alternative to the here and now they feel stuck in.
48. It is one thing to get drunk to blot out the misery of another's death. It is another altogether to keep getting drunk to blot out the misery of one's own life.
49. An old story from African-American lore tells of how a master and one of his slaves would compete by telling dreams they claimed they had. One time, the master said that he had a dream of African-American people's Heaven, and everything was dingy and broken—and there were lots of dirty African-Americans everywhere. His slave answered that he had dreamed of white people's Heaven, and everything was silver and gold, beautiful and in perfect order—but there wasn't a soul in the place!
50. Much of what technology seems to offer is to let people of all races enter a Heaven where there are luxuries the witty slave could never dream of, but in the end there is nothing much better than a Heaven full of gold and empty of people.

51. "Social networking" is indeed about people, but there is something about social networking's promise that is like an ambitious program to provide a tofu "virtual chicken" in every pot: there is something unambiguously social about social media, but there is also something as different from what "social" has meant for well over 99% of people as a chunk of tofu is from real chicken's meat.
52. There is a timeless way of relating to other people, and this timeless way is a large part of asceticism. This is a way of relating to people in which one learns to relate primarily to people one did not choose, in friendship had more permanency than many today now give marriage, in which one was dependent on others (that is, interdependent with others), in which people did not by choice say goodbye to everyone they knew at once, as one does by moving in America, and a social interaction was largely through giving one's immediate presence.
53. "Social networking" is a very different beast. You choose whom to relate to, and you can set the terms; it is both easy and common to block users, nor is this considered a drastic measure. Anonymity is possible and largely encouraged; relationships can be transactional, which is one step beyond disposable, and many people never meet others they communicate with face-to-face, and for that matter arranging such a meeting is special because of its exceptional character.
54. Social networking can have a place. Tofu can have a place. However, we would do well to take a cue to attend to cultures that have found a proper traditional place for tofu. Asian cuisines may be unashamed about using tofu, but they consume it in moderation—and *never* use it to replace meat.
55. We need traditional social "meat." The members of the youngest generation who have the most tofu in their diet may need meat the most.
56. Today the older generation seems to grouse about our younger

generation. Some years ago, someone in the AARP magazine quipped about young people, "Those tight pants! Those frilly hairdos! And you should see what the girls are wearing!" Less witty complaints about the younger generation's immodest style of dress, and their rude disrespect for their elders can just as well be found from the time of Mozart, for instance, or Socrates: and it seems that today's older generation is as apt to criticize the younger generation as their elders presumably were. But here something really is to be said about the younger generation.

57. The older generation kvetching about how the younger generation today has it so easy with toys their elders never dreamed of, never seem to connect their sardonic remarks with how they went to school with discipline problems like spitwads and the spoiled younger generation faced easily available street drugs, or how a well-behaved boy with an e-mail address may receive X-rated spam. "The youth these days" have luxuries their parents never even dreamed of—and temptations and dangers their parents never conceived, not in their worst nightmares.
58. Elders have traditionally complained about the young people being rude, much of which amounts to mental inattention. Part of politeless is being present in body and mind to others, and when the older generation was young, *their* elders assuredly corrected them from not paying attention in the presence of other people and themselves.
59. When they were young, the older generation's ways of being rude included zoning out and daydreaming, making faces when adults turned their back, and in class throwing paper airplanes and passing notes—and growing up meant, in part, learning to turn their back on that arsenal of temptations, much like previous generations. And many of the older generation genuinely turned their backs on those temptations, and would genuinely like to help the younger generation learn to honor those around with more of their physical and mental *presence*.
60. Consumer electronics like the smartphone, aimed to offer

something to youth, often advertise to the younger generation precisely a far better way to avoid a spiritual lesson that was hard enough for previous generations to learn without nearly the same degree of temptation. Few explains to them that a smartphone is not only very useful, but it is designed and sold as an enticing ultra-portable temptation.

61. Literature can be used to escape. But the dividing line between great and not-so-great literature is less a matter of theme, talent, or style than the question of whether the story serves to help the reader escape the world, or engage it.
62. In technology, the question of the virtuous use of technology is less a matter of how fancy the technology is, or how recent, than whether it is used to escape the world or engage it. Two friends who use cell phones to help them meet face-to-face are using technology to support, in some form, the timeless way of relating to other people. Family members who IM to ask prayer for someone who is sick also incorporate technology into the timeless way of relating to other people. This use of technology is quiet and unobtrusive, and supports a focus on something greater than technology: the life God gave us.
63. Was technology made for man, or man for technology?
64. Much of the economy holds the premise that a culture should be optimized to produce wealth: man was made for the economy. The discipline of advertising is a discipline of influencing people without respecting them as people: the customer, apparently, exists for the benefit of the business.
65. Advertising encourages us to take shopping as a sacrament, and the best response we can give is not activism as such, but a refusal of consent.
66. Shopping is permissible, but not sacramental shopping, because sacramental shopping is an ersatz sacrament and identifying with brands an ersatz spiritual discipline. At best sacramental shopping is

a distraction; more likely it is a lure and the bait for a spiritual trap.

67. We may buy a product which carries a mystique, but not the mystique itself: and buying a cool product without buying into its "cool" is hard, harder than not buying. But if we buy into the cool, we forfeit great spiritual treasure.
68. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your life and all of your mind and all of your might, love your neighbor as yourself, and use things: do not love things while using people.
69. Things can do the greatest good when we stop being infatuated with them and put first things first. The most powerful uses of technology, and the best, come from loving those whom you should love and using what you should use. We do not benefit from being infatuated with technology, nor from acting on such infatuation.
70. The Liturgy prays, "Pierce our souls with longing for Thee." Our longing for transcendence is a glory, and the deepest thing that draws us in advertisements for luxury goods, does so because of the glory we were made to seek.
71. But let us attend to living in accordance with nature. Ordinarily when a technology is hailed as "space-conquering," it is on a deep level *body-conquering*, defeating part of the limitations of our embodied nature—which is to say, defeating part of our embodied nature that is in a particular place in a particular way.
72. Technologies to pass great distance quickly, or make it easy to communicate without being near, unravel what from ancient times was an ancient social fabric. They offer something of a line-item veto on the limits of our embodied state: if they do not change our bodies directly, they make our embodied limitations less relevant.
73. A technology can conquer how the body takes nourishment from food, for instance, and therefore be body-conquering without being space-conquering. But whether celebrated or taken for granted, space-conquering technologies are called space-conquering

because they make part of the limitations of our embodied nature less relevant.

74. There is almost a parody of asceticism in space-conquering technologies. Asceticism works to transcend the limited body, and space-conquering technologies seem a way to do the same. But they are opposites.
75. "The demons always fast:" such people are told to instill that fasting has a place and a genuine use, but anyone who focuses too much on fasting, or fasts too rigidly, is well-advised to remember that every single demon outfasts every single saint. But there is something human about fasting: only a being made to eat can benefit from refraining from eating. Fasting is useful because, unlike the angels and demons, a man is not created purely a spirit, but created both spirit and body, and they are linked together. Asceticism knows better, and is more deeply attuned to nature, to attempt to work on the spirit with the body detached and ignored.
76. Even as asceticism subdues the comforts and the body, the work is not only to transfigure the spirit, and transform the body.
77. In a saint the transfiguration means that when the person has died, the body is not what horror movies see in dead bodies: it is glorified into relics.
78. This is a fundamentally different matter from circumventing the body's limitations. There may be good, ascetical uses for space-conquering technologies: but the good part of it comes from the asceticism shining through the technology.
79. The limitations of our embodied existence—aging, bodily aches and pains, betrayal, having doors closed in our face—have been recognized as spiritual stepping stones, and the mature wonder, not whether they have too many spiritual stepping stones, but whether they might need more. Many impoverished saints were concerned, not with whether their life was too hard, but whether it was too easy. Some saints have been tremendously wealthy, but they used their

wealth for other purposes than simply pandering to themselves.

80. Some might ask today, for instance, whether there might be something symbolic to the burning bush that remained unconsumed which St. Moses the Lawgiver saw. And there are many layers of spiritual meaning to the miracle—an emblem of the Theotokos's virgin birthgiving—but it is not the proper use of symbolic layers to avoid the literal layer, without which the symbolic layers do not stand. If the question is, "Isn't there something symbolic about the story of the miracle of the burning bush?", the answer is, "Yes, but it is a fundamental error to use the symbolic layers to dodge the difficulty of literally believing the miracle." In like fashion, there are many virtuous uses of technology, but it is a fundamental error to expect those uses to include using technology to avoid the difficult lessons of spiritual ascesis.
81. Living according to nature is not a luxury we add once we have taken care of necessities: part of harmony with nature is built into necessities. Our ancestors gathered from the natural world, not to seek harmony with nature, but to meet their basic needs—often with far fewer luxuries than we have—and part of living according to nature has usually meant few, if any, luxuries. Perhaps there is more harmony with nature today in driving around a city to run errands for other people, than a luxurious day out in the countryside.
82. Some of the promise the Internet seems to offer is the dream a mind-based society: a world of the human spirit where there is no distraction of external appearance because you have no appearance save that of a handle or avatar, for instance, or a world where people need not appear male or female except as they choose. But the important question is not whether technology through the internet can deliver such a dream, but whether the dream is a dream or a nightmare.
83. To say that the Internet is much more mind-based than face-to-face interactions is partly true. But to say that a mind-based society is more fit for the human spirit than the timeless way of relating, in old-fashioned [meatspace](#), is to correct the Creator on His mistaken

notions regarding His creatures' best interests.

84. People still use the internet all the time as an adjunct to the timeless way of relating. Harmony with nature is not disrupted by technology's use as an adjunct nearly so much as when it serves as a replacement. Pushing for a mind-based society, and harmony with nature, may appeal to the same people, especially when they are considered as mystiques. But pushing for a mind-based society is pushing for a greater breach of living according to nature, widening the gulf between modern society and the ancient human of human life. There is a contradiction in pushing for our life to be both more and less according to nature.
85. There is an indirect concern for asceticism in companies and bosses that disapprove of clock watching. The concern is not an aversion to technology, or that periodically glancing at one's watch takes away all that much time from real work. The practical concern is of a spiritual state that hinders work: the employee's attention and interest are divided, and a bad spiritual state overflows into bad work.
86. In terms of asceticism, the scattered state that cannot enjoy the present is the opposite of a spiritual condition called *nepsis* or, loosely, "watchfulness."
87. The problem that manifests itself in needing to keep getting drunk, with New Age and its hopes for, at the moment, 2012 delivering us from a miserable here and now, or needing a more and more exotic drugged-up sexual thrill, or fleeing to SecondWife, is essentially a lack of *nepsis*.
88. To be delivered by such misery is not a matter of a more radical escape. In a room filled with eye-stinging smoke, what is needed is not a more heroic way to push away the smoke, but a way of quenching the fire. Once the fire is quenched, the smoke dissipates, and with it the problem of escaping the smoke.
89. *Nepsis* is a watchfulness over one's heart, including the mind.

90. Nepsis is both like and unlike metacognition. It observes oneself, but it is not thinking about one's thinking, or taking analysis to the next level: analysis of normal analysis. It is more like coming to one's senses, getting back on course, and then trying to stay on course. It starts with a mindfulness of how one has not been mindful, which then flows to other areas of life.
91. The man who steps back and observes that he is seeking ways to escape the here and now, has an edge. The same goes with worrying or other passions by which the soul is disturbed: for many of the things that trouble our soul, seduce us to answer the wrong question. This is almost invariably more pedestrian than brilliant metacognition, and does not look comfortable.
92. Metanoia, or repentance, is both unconditional surrender and waking up and smelling the coffee. It is among the most terrifying of experiences, but afterwards, one realizes, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!"
93. Once one is past that uncomfortable recognition, one is free to grasp something better.
94. That "something better" is ultimately Christ, and there is a big difference between a mind filled with Christ and a mind filled with material things as one is trying to flee malaise.
95. The attempt to escape a miserable here and now is doomed. We cannot escape into Eden. But we can find the joy of Eden, and the joy of Heaven, precisely in the here and now we are seduced to seek to escape.
96. Living the divine life in Christ, is a spiritual well out of which many treasures pour forth: harmony with nature, the joy of Eden and all the other things that we are given if we seek first the Kingdom of God and His perfect righteousness.
97. It was a real achievement when people pushing the envelope of technology and, with national effort and billions of dollars of

resources, NASA succeeded in lifting a man to the moon.

98. But, as a monk pointed out, the Orthodox Church has known for aeons how to use no resources beyond a little bread and water, and succeed in lifting a man up to God.
99. And we miss the greatest treasures if we think that asceticism or its fruits are only for monks.
00. And there is something that lies beyond even asceticism: contemplation of [the glory of God](#).

How to Survive an Economic Depression

Want to survive?

I learned some pretty big things during the Y2k scare, and some of them have every relevance to how to survive an economic depression.

When year 2000 was approaching, I was part of the doomsday camp. I believed, wrongly, that technology would fail and everything around me would start to fall apart. But did a lot of digging and I think I learned something about what makes people survive really rough situations--and how to survive an economic depression. The economy is in deep trouble, and what I found out then has every relevance now that we are worried about how to survive an economic depression.

When Y2k was approaching, I found a lot of materials on *physical* preparation for such an event, but very little on *psychological* preparation. The most that I can remember reading about that was that when I said on a newsgroup that a Y2k doomsday would be psychologically as well as physically difficult, someone said that I was right and suggested that Y2k preparations include stocking up on board games and condoms.

That answer seemed, to put it politely, not up to snuff. As far as mental preparation goes, that was the equivalent of saying, "If bad things

happen on January 1 2000, be prepared for great physical danger. *Always* remember to look both ways before you cross the street!"

After failing to find something more informative on newsgroups, I went to the library, to look for more information on psychological survival in difficult situations. I did a lot of digging, reading whatever seemed like it might shed light, but finding very little of an answer *anywhere* that I looked. Even a book on psychology and the military said almost nothing about how either soldiers or civilians stood up psychologically to disaster, or what enables a survivor to overcome an incredibly difficult situation.

It was only after a lot of digging that I realized the answer was almost staring me in the face. What makes a survivor is not exactly *psychological*. It is *spiritual*. There was something spiritual about, for instance, people who had survived incredibly hostile situations as hostages and prisoners. It is not exactly that they had some special talent, or drew on some special mind trick or had developed what we would imagine as spiritual powers. It was something almost *pedestrian*.

It had something to do with religious devotion. Faith has something to do with how to survive an economic depression.

I imagine I may raise some eyebrows by suggesting faith has something to do with how to survive a disaster. But faith was how many people survived the Great Depression. Perhaps a great many survivors survived despite their useless faith, or maybe it was a crutch, but if it seems obvious to you that faith could have nothing to do with how people survived the Great Depression, then I would ask you to entertain a possibility you might not have considered. Maybe they know something we have forgotten.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Much of the Bible comes from disastrous times. In the Bible's book of [Habakkuk](#), there is a prophet who sees great evil about him. He cries out to the Lord, and the Lord gives an answer that leaves the prophet stunned: the Lord will punish the wickedness of Israel by having an army of terrorists conquer their land. This was a disaster that might be worse than economic collapse. The prophet asks the Lord a question: how can a righteous God look on such wickedness? And the Lord responds without really answering the prophet's question: the Lord responds without giving the prophet what he wants. But tucked away in the Lord's response are some very significant words: "...the righteous shall live by faith."

Those words were taken up in the New Testament and became a rallying-cry against rigid legalism. But they are more than a response to people who turn religion into a bunch of rules; they speak also in situations where legalism is simply not the issue. The prophet cried out to the Lord about rampant violence. The issue was not really legalism at all. And this is when the words were first spoken: "The righteous shall live by faith." These words were given in terrifying times.

"The righteous shall live by faith" is a non-answer, and a quite deliberate non-answer. The prophet asked how such a pure God could allow such wickedness to exist, and God does not give the answer he is looking for. The Lord doesn't really answer the prophet's question at *all*. It's almost like:

Someone said to a master, "What about the people who have never heard of Christ? Are they all automatically damned to Hell? Tell me; I have heard that you have studied this question."

The master said, "What you need to be saved is for you to believe in Christ, and you have heard of him."

The Lord doesn't tell the prophet what he wants. He gives him

something much better; these brief words say, "[I AM WHO I AM](#), and I will do what I will do, and you may not look past the protecting veil that enshrouds me. But in the disastrous times you face, know this: the righteous shall live by faith."

God doesn't just refuse to tell the prophet what he *wants*. He gives Habakkuk something fundamentally richer and deeper. He tells the prophet what he *needs*. What God tells [Habakkuk](#), "The righteous shall live by faith," is a luminous thread appearing throughout Scripture, woven into the fabric of Proverbs and woven through and through in the [Sermon on the Mount](#). This luminous, radiant thread declares that God is sovereign, in hard times as well as good, and that his divine providence is with his faithful no less. *Even if we are in a depression, God can watch out for us.* (Perhaps *especially* if we are in a depression. The surprising report from many survivors is that God's help is much more obvious in hard times than when things are easy.) Just witness this luminous thread in the [Sermon on the Mount](#):

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall wear. Is there not more to life than food, and more to the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add one hour to his span of life? (You might as well try to worry yourself into being a foot and a half taller!) And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither work nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as gloriously as one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For people without faith

seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own things to worry about. Each day has enough worries of its own.

The righteous shall live by faith, and the Sermon on the Mount has a great deal to say about exactly *how* the righteous shall live by faith. The radiant thread unfolds, unfurls, *beams*, "Money is unworthy of your trust: put your trust in God. Live in the security of faith. Have the true security of faith in God who provides, not the ersatz providence of what you can arrange for yourself. Do not spend your life building a sandcastle for your home and trying to keep it from collapsing. I offer you a way to build a solid house, built on the rock."

And this is not just a statement about how we should not worry about the future when we have it easy. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) closes with words that are entirely relevant to surviving the storms of life when we wonder how to survive an economic depression:

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and its collapse was great.

These are not words about nothing more than how to relax and enjoy life when it is easy. These are words about how to prepare for hard times, and how to survive in a disaster. In other words, they are words about how to survive an economic depression.

In hard times as well as good, *the righteous shall live by faith.*

Indeed, the words "the righteous shall live by faith" originally come from times with an industrial-strength disaster on the horizon!

The Apostle Paul: Portrait of a survivor!

Who can survive stress like an industrial-strength disaster? The Bible paints a picture of one person who survived a lot of really rough times, and not only *survived*, but genuinely *thrived*.

When I was in college, part of the general "foundations of wellness" class was taking the [Holmes Stress Point Scale](#), which assigns points for stressful events to add up to a rough estimate of how stressful your life is. You get a certain number of points for each stressful experience you've been through, and they add up to your total score for how stressful the past year of your life is. The events include:

- Jail term...
- Death of a close friend...
- Outstanding personal achievement...
- Vacation...
- Christmas...
- Minor violation of the law...

The higher a score from stressful events, the more stressful your life is. The scale's explanation is: *If your score is 300 or more, you are at a very high stress level and probably run a major risk of illness in the next year. If your score is 200 to 299, your stress and illness risk are moderate, and if your score is between 150 to 200, your stress and risk are mild.*

My teacher mentioned that one student had computed such a score for a year in the life of the Apostle Paul, who went through a number of events that should score major points for stress:

- Jailed...
- Attacked by a frenzied mob...
- Shipwrecked in the mother of all storms...
- Clandestine escape from a city when people were trying to kill him...
- Physically assaulted by soldiers...

- Survived an assassination attempt...

The student calculated a staggering 675 points for one year in the life of St. Paul!

But the odd thing is that if you read the [Book of Acts](#), St. Paul does not really come across as someone we should pity. We read that some of his colleagues were harassed, beaten, and afterwards were rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for the sake of their Lord. When I read [the accounts of these events](#), I walk away with a sense, not that these suffering heroes are poor and pitiable, but that they are giants and they utterly dwarf me. There is something greater in the Apostle, far greater, than a whopping 675 points worth of *externally* stressful events.

It is the same thing, really, as with people who survived a long time being hostages for terrorists. They had dug deep and built their house on the rock, and when stormwinds battered their house, it survived and stood firm. It is the same thing for the bedrock of how people survived the Great Depression. And if we may be battered by hard economic times, we would like our houses to stand firm as well.

Suffering and sonship

It may be that what we fear that in a potential disaster is that we will lose what is good for us. We may fear getting sidetracked when none of our dreams seem to come true. We may fear that God cannot really provide our good if our recession becomes a depression or even an economic collapse--that the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is presumably about how to live in easy times but wouldn't be quite so helpful when we're in a depression. But there is something we are missing. Some of the things that we fear may have a surprisingly positive place in a well-lived life. There is something we are missing in all this.

Suffering has a place in the divine discipleship—the divine sonship—that the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is all about. "The Son of God became a man that men might become the Sons of God," as C.S. Lewis echoed the ancient wisdom, a wisdom that plays out in discipleship. Discipleship, service to God in difficulties, providence, and ascetical or spiritual practices all come together: God provides for us and disciplines us in hard times as well as good. Sometimes he provides more plainly when we have nothing than when we have everything. In the [Philokalia](#), we hear the words of St. Makarios as he explains the place of suffering in discipleship:

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For

will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The story is told of a woman who was told the Lord would be with her, and afterwards found herself in an incredibly painful situation. When she cried out to the Lord and asked how this could be, the Lord answered:

"I never said it would be easy. I said I'd be *with* you." God's way, it seems, is not to make things easy for us, but to strengthen us for greatness in what are often hard situations, and sometimes disasters. He gives us mountains to climb and the strength for climbing.

And we can climb mountains even if we are in an economic depression. Perhaps *especially* if we are in an economic recession. God's providence does not spare us from our suffering. Not even if we're really good Christians—*especially* not if we're really good Christians! If you read the saints' lives (see the links on [the natural cycle clock](#)), you will see that even with all the wondrous providence God provides for the saints, the saints in fact suffer much *more* than the rest of us; they know sufferings worse than most of us have ever been through.

There are saints whose prayers healed others—but who were for themselves never healed of their own major illnesses. If this sounds ironic, remember that Christ also was told, "Physician, heal thyself." Christ is pre-eminent as one who saved others but could not save himself, and "He saved others, but he cannot save himself" is one way of *defining* God's kingdom. Part of how people survived the Great Depression was that they carried the spirit of God's kingdom and worked to save others, and not just themselves. Communities of people survived the Great Depression because, even if no one could save "Me! Me! Me!", perhaps each one could help save *others*.

God's providence does not spare us from our suffering, but he works with us *in* our suffering, often to do things with us that could never happen if we had things our way. It may be precisely *on* the mountain, *in* the act of climbing, that God gives us the strength to climb!

Sometimes God works with us despite our best efforts to fix things so we can have things our way. Wise people rightly tells us, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans," and "You can't always get what you want." And perhaps if we did get what we wanted, we wouldn't get what God wanted for us. Some of us may try to fix our problems and pray to God to take them away—when his plan is to use our problems to build us up. St. Makarios above quotes [Hebrews](#), and in fact [Hebrews](#) is one of the clearest books of the Bible that God works with us in suffering

—in fact, that Christ himself was perfected by suffering (source):

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. Therefore, holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchiz'edek.

...But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Our view of suffering is often that if we are suffering, then we cannot be where we should be. It often seems we can only be where we should be when we are *out* of a difficult situation). It seems that we are sidetracked,

and will only stop being sidetracked when we have things our way. But that is absolutely false. God worked with Christ in suffering. God worked with the saints in suffering. God worked with us in suffering. And that means that we can be in suffering and in pain, with our godly plans failing, and we are still just where God wants us: we may not see it, but sometimes our earthly failure is a heavenly victory. If God allows us to be in an economic collapse, he may be doing things with us, good things, that we might never happen if we had the comfort we seem to need. The last words above, about suffering and failure, lead *directly* into [the famous "faith hall of fame" in Hebrews 11](#).

What may be happening in our sufferings is that God is building us into greater people than if we succeed in getting what we want. Including if we are in an economic depression. This is a basic lesson of people growing up: many young people have big dreams for themselves, but grow by middle age into living for others, growing into something that could never happen if all their youthful dreams came true. And suffering has a place in this—and a greater and deeper value. The Son of God was made perfect through suffering. Innocent suffering is sharing in the suffering of Christ: Christ's suffering is made perfect in his people. St. Paul, the survivor who went through terrible suffering, wrote, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." ([Col 1.24 RSV](#))

Suffering is *not* getting off-track, nor does it force us out of God's plans, so that we only get into God's providence as soon as things are the way we would like. What some of us fear in suffering is that if we are in difficult circumstances, then that must mean we are spiritual failures as well as failing on earth. If we are faithful and still fail in our plans, this does not mean that either God's plans or providence have failed. Often he is working at us when we are suffering and we are so far afield from anything that makes sense to us.

Everything we meet is either a blessing from God, or a trial that God allows for our strengthening. You may say that there is something evil in your trials, and you would be entirely right: there is something evil, and perhaps demonic, in our trials and afflictions. Perhaps you may say that there seems to be something almost demonic about an economic collapse,

and you would still be right. But, as C.S. Lewis observes, *all* of us do the will of God. We may do the will of God as Satan and Judas did, as *instruments*, or we may do the will of God as Peter and John did, as *sons*. But all of us do the will of God, and ultimately Satan and may be no more than a hammer in God's hand. And even if God allows rough trials, he allows them for our strengthening. St. Makarios is very clear: "The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to." Evil is on a leash. Let us be faithful. Every move the Devil plays is one move closer to his loss and God's victory, and ours if we are faithful.

I am not saying that the future holds much suffering. You or I may have a lot of suffering, or actually not that much. I am, however, saying that however much suffering God allows, he can still work with us. He can still work with us in an economic depression. (And that is even *without* going into how a great many people have been in situations they dreaded, and found life to still be beautiful.) As St. Paul, a survivor, closed [Romans 8](#):

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Building a house on the rock—*it's not all about you!*

Ascesis refers to disciplined spiritual practice. It's a part of building a house on the rock. In the Orthodox tradition, these include sacraments, church attendance and daily liturgical prayers, reading and listening to Scripture, working to keep the Jesus prayer in your heart ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"), growing into the liturgical seasons and internal and external fasting, hospitality, service, thanksgiving, repentance, giving to others who ask your help, cutting back on selfish pleasures, including icons in your prayer, solitude, community, and other practices. All of these can offer different help in growing to spiritual maturity.

But there comes a crucial caveat. None of these, if they are working correctly, are all about us. However essential they are to building a house on the rock, they are infinitely more than tools for how to survive an economic depression. They are tools to living in communion with God and being transformed by his grace. These disciplines, used rightly, can clear away obstacles to our growing in discipleship under God, but if they are used wrongly, they can be extremely harmful.

Using ascetical practices wrongly, as ends in themselves, has the same problem as Eeyore in [The House at Pooh Corner](#):

[Piglet picked some violets, decided to give them to Eeyore, and went to visit him.]

"Oh, Eeyore," began Piglet a little nervously, because Eeyore was busy.

"To-morrow," said Eeyore. "Or the next day." Piglet came a little closer to see what it was. Eeyore had three sticks on the ground, and was looking at them. Two of the sticks were touching at one end, but not at the other, and the third stick was laid across them. Piglet thought that perhaps it was a Trap of some kind.

"Oh, Eeyore," he began again, "I just—"

"Is that little Piglet?" said Eeyore, still looking hard at his sticks.

"Yes, Eeyore, and I—"

"Do you know what this is?"

"No," said Piglet.

"It's an A."

"Oh," said Piglet.

"Not O—A," said Eeyore severely. "Can't you hear, or do you think you have more education than Christopher Robin?"

"Yes," said Piglet. "No," said Piglet very quickly, and he came closer still.

"Christopher Robin said it was an A, and an A it is—until somebody treads on it," Eeyore added sternly.

Piglet jumped backwards hurriedly, and smelt at his violets.

"Do you know what A means, little Piglet?"

"No, Eeyore, I don't."

"It means Learning, it means Education, it means all the things that you and Pooh haven't got. That's what A means."

"Oh," said Piglet again. "I mean, does it?" he explained quickly.

"I'm telling you. People come and go in this Forest, and they say, 'It's only Eeyore, so it doesn't count.' They walk to and fro saying 'Ha ha!' But do they know anything about A? They don't. It's just three sticks to them. But to the Educated—mark this, little Piglet—to the Educated, not meaning Poohs and Piglets, it's a great and glorious A. Not," he added, "just something that anybody can come and breathe

on."

Piglet stepped back nervously, and looked round for help.

"Here's Rabbit," he said gladly. "Hallo, Rabbit."

Rabbit came up importantly, nodded to Piglet, and said, "Ah, Eeyore," in the voice of one who would be saying "Good-bye" in about two more minutes.

"There's just one thing I wanted to ask you, Eeyore. What happens to Christopher Robin in the mornings nowadays?"

"What's this that I'm looking at?" said Eeyore, still looking at it.

"Three sticks," said Rabbit promptly.

"You see?" said Eeyore to Piglet. He turned to Rabbit. "I will now answer your question," he said solemnly.

"Thank you," said Rabbit.

"What does Christopher Robin do in the mornings? He learns. He becones Educated. He instigorate—I think that is the word he mentioned, but I may be referring to something else—he instigorate Knowledge. In my small way, I also, if I have the word right, am—am doing what he does. That, doe instance is?"

"An A," said Rabbit, "but not a very good one. Well, I must get back and tell the others."

Eeyore looked at his sticks and then he looked at Piglet.

"What did Rabbit say it was?" he asked.

"An A," said Piglet.

"Did you tell him?"

"No, Eeyore, I didn't. I expect he just knew."

"He knew? You mean this A thing is a thing Rabbit knew?"

"Yes, Eeyore. He's very clever, Rabbit is."

"Clever!" said Eeyore scornfully, putting a foot heavily on his three sticks. "Education!" said Eeyore bitterly, jumping on his six sticks. "What is Learning?" asked Eeyore as he kicked his twelve sticks into the air. "A thing Rabbit knows! Ha!"

We need to avoid being Eeyores with our spiritual discipline, or our spirituality, or our faith, or our religion. Letters serve a greater purpose, and so do ascetical practices: we should not, like Eeyore, stare at an A and tell ourselves that it is our Education and Learning, or Prayers and Church Attendance as the case may be.

The point of ascetical practices is to be steps of the Great Dance: living the life that God shares, and becoming one of the sons of God. It's not merely a set of survival skills that work in an economic recession or depression, or even an economic collapse, even if "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own," is quite practical advice. The point is to seek first the kingdom of a God who knows our survival needs: as God told Habakkuk before a disaster, "The righteous shall live by faith." The luminous thread beams brightly because it is more than just a white thread. It *shines*, and it shines with the light of Heaven, a light of divine love that illumines Creation.

What Eeyore doesn't get about the luminous thread is that it is the light of Heaven shining on earth.

Better than an endowment

Some years before I became Orthodox, I was at a class where someone was commenting on Proverbs, and its texts that say, in essence, "Put your trust in God, not money." ("Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death," [Prov 11:4 RSV](#).) One point he made that particularly surprised me was, "Endowments aren't so great."

He asked a question: if we want to be independently wealthy, who do we want the "independently" to mean we are independent from? The answer he gave: "*Independent from God*." If we want to be independently wealthy, we may want something more than mere luxuries. The basic fantasy of life as we imagine ourselves being independently wealthy, is a life that is in control and unlike the actual messiness of our real lives with so many things that are simply beyond our control. And his suggestion, based on real life as well as Proverbs, is that it is actually not good for us to have an endowment that we can trust.

One kind of person counselors work with is the person who cannot be happy without being in control of everyone around them. The basic problem is that a person who needs to be in control is a tragically shrunken person, and part of what a counselor will try to give a person is an opportunity to step into a larger world. If you believe, "I can't be happy unless I'm in control of everyone I'm involved with," that will set you up for a lot of unhappiness.

This is not just because it is really hard to control everyone else. A few people who want to control others really do manage to control others around them, but they are really as unhappy as others who want the same thing but don't manage the control over others they always want to establish. As Chesterton observed, there may be some desires which are not achievable, but there *are* some desires which are not *desirable*.

If you want the world to be small enough that there is nothing outside your control, you want to live in a small and terribly shrunken world. If you let go of that kind of control, you may find that you have let

yourself into a much bigger world than if you were the biggest thing around, and in the process you become bigger yourself. Instead of being a tin god ruling a world as cramped as a cubicle, you become servant in God's vast mansions. And being one of many of these servants is a much better position to be in than dominating as a tin god.

And there is more to this larger world, the larger world of serving in God's great mansions. The words, "The righteous shall live by faith" were given, in full force, when a brutal invasion was coming. Those words may not originally have been about how to survive an economic depression. They were originally more about how to survive something worse: your country being taken over by terrorists!

The words, "The righteous shall live by faith," and the [Sermon on the Mount](#), apply to some pretty rough situations, *including* an economic recession, economic depression, or economic collapse. Christ's words about not worrying do not apply just to privileged people who have nothing seriously worth worrying about; many of the people who first heard the [Sermon on the Mount](#) were on the *bottom* of the totem pole and would see less material comfort than the kind of person most Americans would imagine as a homeless person.

The model prayer Christ would give is not a prayer for something nicer for people stuck on a nasty diet of burgers and KFC; the one physical request is for *bread*—by American standards, quite a dull thing to eat day in and day out, and possibly poorer nutritional fare than fast food—and it is in *this* context that Christ, in the [Sermon on the Mount](#), beckons us to store up treasure in Heaven, and invites us to a spiritual feast that unfurls in hard times as well as when everything meets our expectations. He invites us to the spiritual feast, the larger world, that is at the heart of spirituality and religion and is unlocked by faith. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) neither assumes nor needs a high standard of living to have real treasure.

The invitation to dance the Great Dance is open to us now as ever. All of us are invited to the Great Feast. Even if we've snubbed words like, "Money doesn't make you happy," and, "The best things in life are free," not only do those truths remain open to us, but the Divine Providence is

no less open. If our external circumstances remove all the luxuries that serve us, we may discover that not only is it better to give than receive, but it is also better to serve and be served. We might take a tip from how people survived the Great Depression. If we are unemployed, we might serve others and find something that technologies and luxuries can't give, and if our 401(k) plan becomes a 404(k) and vanishes, we might lean on God's providence and discover that God's providence gives us more than money could.

There's a sign that was seen around my hometown that says, "Money may not do everything, but it sure keeps the kids in touch!" And I wonder if that is precisely what we gain if we do not know what will meet our needs in the future: our material needs can "keep the kids in touch" for God. Especially in an economy in shambles. And if that happens, we have something no money could buy: keeping in touch with God in a way that is ultimately a Heavenly transformation.

The prodigal son: "I wish you were dead!"

The parable of the prodigal son begins ([source](#)):

There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the husks that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Today, one of the ways parents might give money to children is letting them "borrow against their inheritance:" they wouldn't have to pay the money back, but they lose that much of their inheritance when their parents die. And this is considered a fairly normal arrangement.

This *isn't* what is going on here. The younger son's request telegraphs something loud and clear: "I wish you were dead!"

We see a first glimpse of God's love—a love to the point of madness. Out of all responses the father could have to this affront, he gave every last penny he was asked for. The love to the point of madness may be easier to see later on, but it is already present in the gift by which he answers the ludicrously inappropriate request.

The son goes off to live life the way he wants to. And living life the way he wants to hits rock bottom. The big party he imagined he'd make for himself turns into famine and dire straits that leave him coveting the unappetizing husks that he is feeding to unclean, vile swine. He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots, not his father.

He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots. Just like some of us here. We don't want to have to wait under the authority of a Father who calls the shots. We want money and control, with things lined up here and now. What is it we are telling God if we ask him to give us money and control on our terms? Something a bit like, "I wish you were dead."

The younger son has discovered that life with his father out of the picture is not so glorious and wonderful. And he realizes the extent of his fall. So he resolves to go back and beg, not even for forgiveness, but possibly his father might even contain his wounded resentment enough to let him work for pay and be able to buy bread. (Who knows? Maybe a long shot, but what real alternative did he have?)

What was the father doing in all of this?

When husbands have gone off to war, there have been wives who have stood by the path of the doorway, looking for some hope that their husbands may return, looking and waiting, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year... *never* giving up! And the father in our story was doing *exactly* that.

The father was looking, waiting, and saw his son far off, and

completely cast off his upper-class dignity to run and embrace him. Love to the point of madness! He didn't even wait for an apology before embracing him and kissing him!

And when the son made a full confession, hoping maybe to toil for his father's scraps, the father pulls out all the stops: the best robe, a ring for his finger, and the best food possible for a royal feast. *This is love to the point of madness!*

But the story continues on to a more sobering note ([source](#)):

Now his older son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, `Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and pleaded with him, but he answered his father, `Look, I have served you for all of these years, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a goat kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

And he said to him, `Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

We have an Eeyore here.

This story has been called the parable of the two prodigals, meaning that not only did the one son tragically fall, but the other, elder son also tragically falls from the glory his father would have wished for him. At the beginning, the younger son wished that his father was dead. At the end, did the older son wish his father was dead?

The older son is a tragic spiritual Eeyore.

His statement could have come from a very different angle. For all of the years the older son was in his father's service, he toiled, and he may not have had rich party food—only solid, nourishing, ordinary food day by day. For all these many years, he worked hard in the context of the father training him, and drawing him into mature manhood. In the meantime, his brother has been ripping up his own soul, losing even what he thought he had at the mercy of merciless people with no one else who cared for his well-being. The brother who all but told his father, "I wish you were dead," was in every sense save the literal, himself *dead*.

If it is painful to lose one's parents, it is another level of pain to lose one's child, and the father had seen one of his sons—not to mention the older son's only brother—die a living death. Now he was back, and in every sense *including* the literal, alive. Was killing the fatted calf even *enough* of a celebration?

The older son didn't get it. How well did his service to his father work? Not very well; it went badly enough that instead of sharing in his father's joy at a lost son who "was dead, and is alive again," acts bitterly affronted and indicts his father searingly. Which is to say, the son's hard work didn't *work*, any more than Eeyore's laborious staring at his three sticks achieved the true heart of "Learning" and "Education."

The point, though, is not really the tragedy of the older son. The point is that God welcomes people who turn to him, and welcomes them with open arms. It is only one step to turn to God, even if you think you are ten thousand steps away. But when are we ready?

It is easy enough to wait for life to *really* begin. When? Maybe when the present illness is gone, or when we get that promotion, or maybe just when we get a job in the first place, or when someone we deal with will become not quite so difficult a person, or when we have something paid off, or when Washington gets its act together. When something big or small changes, *then* maybe we will be in God's blessing. St. Herman of Alaska met some people who were waiting for their lives to *really* begin ([source](#)):

Father Herman gave them all one general question:

"Gentlemen, what do you love above all, and what will each of you wish for your happiness?" Various answers were offered... Some desired wealth, others glory, some a beautiful wife, and still others a beautiful ship he would captain; and so forth in the same vein. "Is it not true," Father Herman said to them concerning this, "that all your various wishes can bring us to one conclusion - that each of you desires that which in his own understanding he considers the best, and which is most worthy of his love?" They all answered, "Yes, that is so!" He then continued, "Would you not say, 'Is not that which is best, above all, and surpassing all, and that which by preference is most worthy of love, the Very Lord, our Jesus Christ, who created us, adorned us with such ideals, gave life to all, sustains everything, nurtures and loves all, who is Himself Love and most beautiful of all men?' Should we not then love God above everything, desire Him more than anything, and search him out?"

All said, "Why, yes! That's self-evident!" Then the Elder asked, "But do you love God?" They all answered, "Certainly, we love God. How can we not love God?" "And I a sinner have been trying for more than forty years to love God, I cannot say that I love Him completely," Father Herman protested to them. He then began to demonstrate to them the way in which we should love God. "If we love someone," he said, "we always remember them; we try to please them. Day and night our heart is concerned with the subject. Is that the way you gentlemen love God? Do you turn to Him often? Do you always remember Him? Do you always pray to Him and fulfill His holy commandments?" They had to admit that they did not! "For our own good, and for our own fortune," continued the Elder, "let us at least promise ourselves that from this very minute we will try to love God more than anything and to fulfill His Holy Will!"

The time for God is not at some indefinite point in the future when things will fit our hopes better. The time to work with God, in a sense the only time we should be concerned with, is now. Not later, *now*.

More precious than gold

When I was a child, I remembered a story about a fearsome dragon who told a knight that if the knight would tickle the dragon's throat with a sword, he would have a great treasure. The knight rode up on his horse and approached the dragon, already afraid, and asked if the treasure was as good as a good horse and a good suit of armor. It was more, the dragon said. The knight asked if the treasure was as good as a silver suit of armor, and shield and sword to match. It was, the dragon assured him. The knight then asked if the treasure was better than gold. The dragon answered that it was more precious than rooms full of gold. So the terrified knight trembled and tickled the dragon's throat with his sword, and asked what the treasure was. And the dragon turned and ripped the knight's sword out of his hand, breathing out a tremendous deluge of fire and smoke and roared, "Your *life!*" And the terrified knight, having lost his sword, fled as best he could, and grasped a treasure far more precious than rooms and rooms full of gold.

Hard times may still let us know what is truly important, and what is truly treasure.

Even if we are in an economic depression, we have a treasure worth more than rooms and rooms full of gold: our lives.

For the righteous who walk by faith, hard times may even turn out to be good times.

St. John Chrysostom once wrote to people who think they are somebody if they conspicuously ride on a horse and have an armed servant clear the way before them, and told them that they were missing something and have *all* the wrong priorities. These words seem like they have nothing to do with how to survive in an economic depression—but on a very deep level, they have *everything* to do with how to survive in an economic depression where we may lose any number of things that seem so essential. St. John Chrysostom wrote ([source](#)):

And I know that I am disgusting my hearers. But what can I do?

I have set my mind on this and will not stop saying these things, whether or not anything comes of it. For what is the point of having someone clear the way before you in the marketplace? Are you walking among wild beasts so that you need to drive away those who meet you? Do not be afraid of the people who approach you and walk near you; none of them bite. But why do you consider it an insult to walk alongside other people? What craziness is this, what ludicrous folly, when you don't mind having a horse follow close behind you, but if it is a person, you think you are disgraced unless the person is driven a hundred miles away. And why do you have servants to carry horse _____, using the free as slaves, or rather yourself living more dishonorably than any slave? For truly, anyone who bears so much pride is more repulsive than any slave.

Therefore people who have enslaved themselves to this vile habit will never come within sight of true liberty. No, if you must drive away and clear away anything, do not let it be those who come near you, but your own pride. Do not do this by your servant, but by yourself, not by this material weapon, but by the spiritual one. Since now your servant drives away those who walk alongside you, but you yourself are driven from your rightful place by your own self-will, more disgracefully than any servant can drive your neighbor. But if, descending from your horse, you will drive away pride by humility, you will sit higher and place yourself in greater honor, without needing any servant to do this for you. I mean that when you have become modest and walk on the ground, you will be seated on the horse-drawn carriage of humility which carries you up to the very heavens, the carriage with winged steeds: but if falling from the horse-drawn carriage of heaven, you pass into that of arrogance, you will be in no better state than crippled beggars who are carried along the ground—no, much more wretched and pathetic than they are: since they are carried because of their bodies' weakness, but you because of the disease of your own arrogance.

Some of us also need the carriage of humility, even if we are not even in a position to make everybody get out of our way. And some of us might benefit from the loving interdependence that was how people survived the Great Depression.

In tough times—and in tougher times—we may lose things we have set our hearts on, but it may be that however much we resist, God will give us something better. What if I lose my car, for instance? How could I get something better? But it is entirely possible that I could get something better than my present car. I might get something better than my own Rolls Royce, even better than my own private jet. I might get more *interdependence*, where *I* do not get around by what *I* do by *my* car. I may still be able to go places, but now by the love of my friends and family.

In that case, if I get some groceries, or a ride to church, I am not getting it as something run by me, me, me; I am riding on community and love. And the love of another who cares about me is a much bigger thing than economic self-sufficiency. It's the same thing as food tasting better if it is prepared with love for hospitality—then it isn't just food. You are, in a very real sense, eating a friend's love, and that is a richer and deeper kind of sustenance—and a richer, deeper, and fuller *goodness*!

Who knows? I might ride even higher than this if my car is taken from me. Perhaps I might respond to the humiliation of losing my car by starting to let Christ chauffeur me to Heaven in the flying Rolls-Royce of humility. Maybe I might even start being grateful, and be carried by the car of gratitude, and look for ways that I might launch into the heavens on the immense celestial starship of service to others.

And it is the starship of service to others—of saving others even though I cannot save myself—that shines with celestial glory. "It is more blessed to give than to receive"—the [Sermon on the Mount](#) again. Perhaps I might stop thinking about my own survival and instead think about how I can save others even though I cannot save myself. Some people did not just survive the Great Depression; they learned that life is beautiful. They stopped being tin gods trying to rule over a shrunken world and became servants of God and each other in the vast mansions of a glorious God. In the Great Depression, they did not have gold, but they grasped a treasure vaster than rooms and rooms full of gold. For some, the Great Depression was a wakeup call to what is truly important in life.

And that is true wealth.

Why are some of us not living this way already? Repentance is terrifying. In the tale of the prodigal son, the son who had devoured his father's property was in far from his father's house, and had real work to get back. He had to *travel* in a much rougher sense than taking a plane, train, or bus, and faced much nastier dangers than "Dinner in New York, breakfast in London, luggage in Sydney."

Our word "travel" comes from the French *travailler*, referring to work, and not exactly easy work: with slightly different spelling, the same word appears in English as "travail," meaning a mother's struggle in childbirth. Travel was hard, gruelling, and dangerous labor, and not for the faint of heart. And the prodigal son undertook travel with far less of the strength—not to mention absolutely none of the wealth—by which he had gotten there. The feat would have been comparable to running a marathon, or at least a marathon where your path might well go through the turf of thugs lying in wait and quite willing to kill anyone who would *travail* into their ambush.

And yet this is exactly what the prodigal son did. His brother may have done the ascetical work of prayers and fasting; but the younger son undertook something much tougher: repentance which is, in a spiritual sense, what the younger son did to return home.

Repentance has been called unconditional surrender. It has been called other things as well, and it terrifies: it is a decision to return home and beg for mercy when you have no grounds to expect to be treated like anything but the vilest of the scum of the earth. Perhaps the Father's love to the point of madness may respond otherwise when we have repented. Perhaps we when we surrender conditionally and expect to be razed to the ground, we find ourselves walking away triumphant victors whose refusal to surrender was holding on to defeat for dear life, terrified to let go of our defeat because we think it helps us. Perhaps we have nothing, really, to lose but our misery. But that isn't our concern when we need to repent.

But if we can repent—for all of us have much to repent of—and step into the [Sermon on the Mount](#) and begin to live by faith, then the Father's love will answer, and give us something better than whatever we grasp for

in our forgetfulness that a provident God already knows our needs just as well in an economic depression as any other time. In an economic depression as much as any other time, the Father's love can meet these needs much better than we will if we control our inheritance ourselves.

In hard times in the past the Lord's arm and providence have shown more plainly than they sometimes do here. Do you want to know how to survive an economic depression? The answer is very simple. It's not a matter of what you arrange. It's a matter of what *God* provides. When there is no natural hope of God's saints being taken care of, it may be a supernatural providence that we don't see as often when we have easy times.

In hard times as well as easy, the luminous thread woven throughout Scripture, appearing in one place in the words, "the just shall live by faith," and another place in a [Sermon on the Mount](#) that says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you"—this luminous thread is at the heart of faith, spirituality, and religion—and this luminous thread is more. It is a participation in the life of a God of love to the point of madness.

The luminous thread is spun by a God of love to the point of madness.

It may be in hard times that we fear that in hard times we will lose what is good for us.

But it may be that hard times, whether a recession, depression, or economic collapse, serve as a divinely given clue-by-four when we discover that the Father's love to the point of madness knows, and will give, what is much better for us. And on that point, I would like to quote a praise song about what is truly more precious than gold: the words go:

Lord, you are more precious than silver.
Lord, you are more costly than gold.
Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds,
And nothing I desire compares to you.

In one variant these words answer:

IN ONE VARIANT, THESE WORDS ANSWER:

And the Father said:

"Child, you are more precious than silver.

Child, you are more costly than gold.

Child, you are more beautiful than diamonds,

And nothing I desire compares to you."

These are the words of divine love to the point of madness, of a God who loves saints and sinners alike, of a God who rejoices more over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous who do not need to repent. And this is a God who loves us in hard times as well as good, a God of providence who seeks our highest good whenever we turn to him.

God be merciful to us. (Amen!)

From Russia, with Love

A Spiritual Guide to Surviving Political and Economic Disaster

Holy Russia and Holy America

It may be jolting to American Christians, at least, to speak of "Holy Russia". It smacks of a bad kind of patriotism, and it invites the same kind of response that has some devout U.S. Christians answer "God bless America!" by saying, "America, bless God!", or "God bless America... and China... and Guatemala... and Ghana... and..." Why besides the wrong kind of patriotism would some writers speak of "Holy Russia"?

The earliest story among the "founding legends" of U.S. national consciousness were of devout, faith-filled, and profoundly moral pilgrims leaving England to practice their faith on what would become U.S. soil. Before the Boston Tea Party, before the cry of, "No taxation without representation!" or the shot heard round the world, before any other legendary event is the story of *pilgrims* seeking to live their faith as purely as they could. Do the legends give us reason to speak of the U.S. as holy land? The devout American Evangelicals I know wouldn't dream of it: when they say "holy lands", they very clearly mean, "the lands of Christ and the Bible." It wouldn't occur to them to use the term "holy land" to mean "land of the pilgrims' pride" or the lands of history like the Great Awakening.

But you are missing something about Christ if you think his Incarnation is limited to when his Mother conceived him; the Incarnation of Christ unfurls in his saints, and the purpose of becoming Christian is to become a little Christ. and become by grace what God is by nature.

Equally, you are missing something about holy land if you think that Christ by living on land may make it holy, but Christians cannot do anything like this. The prolonged effect of many saints over many years is to lift their land up to God, and the Gospel that reaches out to the whole earth is a Gospel that can raise the whole earth up to God. When you understand that Christ lives in the faithful, then you see why holy land unfurls to be where Christ lives through his saints and does not stop with the list of places Christ visited personally.

Orthodoxy in the U.S. has its own "[patron saints of this blessed land](#)", and this is an excellent start. Russia has had Orthodox saints for over a millennium, and its list of saints is all but innumerable. There are Russian patriots who would agree that the communist government was godless, but the other side of what it showed in its attacks on Russian Orthodox Church was how tough a Church there was to "need" such attacks and still not be killed: National Socialism in the Third Reich killed more than ten million Jews and other unfortunates, and socialism in the U.S.S.R. killed more than a hundred million Orthodox Christians and other unfortunates: socialist persecution in the Soviet Union created more Christian martyrs than in, ultimately, the rest of history put together. And that dearly costly witness means that even the Soviet persecutions left a river of martyrs' blood to sanctify Russian soil. "Holy Russia," made holy by saints living as faithful monks and made holy by saints dying as faithful martyrs. Christ unfurls in their stories.

There are profound differences between Russia and the U.S.; any number of books could explore the differences. But there are also some similarities, and not just the profound similarities of shared humanity. There were some eerie similarities when I read about educated "progress" in Russia that was ever so much more sophisticated and enlightened than the country's backwards religious roots. The similarity to things I had grown up with in the U.S. was almost spooky.

One person surveyed a religion poll and tried to play down the exaggerated claim oddly shared by U.S. militant atheists and militant fundamentalists: "American religious roots are being rapidly abandoned," a drum that has been beating nonstop since the days of the Puritans.

Notwithstanding this claim, the person argued from the religion poll that there has never been a nation as Christian as America today: America today, he explicitly argued, is more Christian than Israel is Jewish or Utah is Mormon. Maybe people veer more towards "spirituality" and less towards "religion", and maybe there are twenty things conservative Evangelicals wince at: but to someone who said, "You have a rather, um, inclusive definition of 'Christian'," the author might well respond, "You have a rather inclusive definition of 'not Christian at all'." And, even if Orthodox may wince at this, devout American Evangelicals do have a sense of "Either you're in Special Forces or you're not really a patriot at all." Perhaps no nation ever has satisfied the devout for religious commitment, but if we can call India a Hindu nation, Turkey a Muslim nation, and Italy a Catholic nation even though none of these are theocracies, maybe it's missing the point to say, "America is not a Christian nation, at least not today. It's not a theocracy, for starters, and it's not nearly religious enough to satisfy the religious right." That's not the *point*.

Someone else has said, "If India is the most religious nation on earth, and Sweden is the least religious nation on Earth, then the U.S. is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes." There is a grain of truth there, and it is a grain of truth reminiscent of Russia as it was engulfed with socialism. Russia, too, was a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes, and it has been a long and difficult struggle for Russia's Indians to start regaining ground.

There are other spiritual similarities; Russia's story does not begin with socialism. To Russians, nineteenth century Russia may be a proverbial golden age, spoken of as some Orthodox theologians speak of the fourth century and its Christological victories, or as Protestants might speak of the days of the Reformation. On the Orthodox humor site [The Onion Dome](#), the loving caricature of Fr. Vasily habitually derides proposals by saying, "Was [*such-and-such proposal*] in nineteenth century Russia?" (The obvious answer was no, and if it wasn't to be found in nineteenth century Russia, the implication was that Orthodox Christians have no need for it.) But some Orthodox in the gulag—I think in particular of [Fr. Arseny](#)—explained the terrors all about them as a divine chastisement for Russia's arrogance in the nineteenth century.

Russia fell when it was struck because it was rotted from within.

We speak today of the global economic crisis. The word *crisis* comes from the Greek word for judgment, and we are in a moral and spiritual crisis that comes from seeking treasures on earth and ignoring treasures in Heaven, a charge I am guilty of too. We believe in a high and rising standard of living, and here in America we will mortgage our future if it will only let us try to keep our standard of living for now. And that is the kind of rottenness from within that leaves us vulnerable to blows. Or one kind; there are others.

50 Things You Can Do Even If the Writing Is on the Wall

As I write, some U.S. journalists have started to say, "We really like our President, but we still have big problems as a country."

Expecting socialism to neatly give us we want is, perhaps, naïve: but it is not my main intent to ask people to read the introduction to [The Black Book of Communism](#), or to organize a crusade to straighten out Washington. I would rather talk about what we as people can do if more trouble happens.

Out of the many saints in Russia, God did not stop the concentration camps, but he was at work, in his saints, *in* the concentration camps. It may seem strange to say that Heaven could be present in socialist concentration camps—horrid camps where Hitler sent observers for guidance and inspiration, for the camps planned for Jews—but there were saints sent to those socialist camps, and those saints brought Heaven with them, because Heaven is there wherever God's saints live and die in faithfulness and prayer. Think I'm being a bit too poetic and unreal? [Read about a devout priest who was sent to concentration camps with all manner of painful realities, and brought Heaven with him in the death camps.](#)

The Orthodox Church has great experience living under adverse circumstances, and it is simply not the case that the Church can only function normally in easy times. When St. Constantine ended Roman persecutions against the Church, some saints complained because times had become easy: hard times adorn the Church with martyrs, and what do soft times offer that compares with that? The Church may be stronger under some persecution than when everything goes our way. We may be in for more of a rough ride, and the bad news is that there may be no way to escape it to live normal life. But the good news is that there is an *alternative* to trying to escape it: we can live normal life *in* the rough ride. Orthodoxy is a way of living normally in a hard world.

What I most want to do in this piece is share some of what the Orthodox Church has lived under socialism. There could be significance in the fact that one of the patron saints of America was born in Russia, came over to America and ministered among some very poor people, and then returned to Russia and became the first priest to be martyred under the socialists: [St. John Kochurov](#). Orthodoxy in Russia has had a lot of opportunity to learn to live under socialism.

Here are **50 things you can do even if the writing is on the wall:**

1. Don't believe spam.

Don't believe spammers (and other advertisers) who offer ads of a classy-looking watch that will make you happy and contented. Asking a watch to make you *either* of these things is like asking a stone to lay an egg or using gasoline to extinguish a fire. Watches can tell time and maybe do other things, but *no* watch can make you permanently happy.

If you try to buy a watch to make you content, a nice-looking "replica luxury watch" will only feel good for so long; then you'll need the real thing, or think you do, until your discontent grows and you want something you can't get like a watch that is worth as much as your car. But even if you could get it, there would be more standing between you and happiness than not having enough money to keep indulging yourself. You would still be discontent—until you got a watch worth as much as a good house, or maybe a collection of exotic watches, or maybe some super-special watch that ought to be in a museum. But still you won't be content; you'll be less content than when spammers told you you needed a replica watch to live well. And, for that matter, even if you had the money to indulge that fancy, you will paradoxically be less content with a unique, handmade, multi-million-dollar Swiss watch than you were with that first almost-convincing "replica" watch sold to you by a spammer. Trying to get more and more things that will make you happy doesn't work. As far as the game of being happy by owning a good enough watch goes, *the only way to win this game is not to play at all.*

2. The Bible says, "In humility consider others better than yourself," and it really would have been a lot easier if it said, "Be grateful to God for making you superior." Or at least *I* would have found it easier, at least if an exception were made for me.

But these offensive words conceal a treasure. When I am full of myself, I find it difficult to enjoy and appreciate others. Nietzsche thought of most others as scum and slime and could not enjoy their company. But humility is more than not being so full of yourself; it is a key to enjoying others.

In terms of difficult co-workers, [Fr. Arseny](#) lived in a concentration camp where the food was rancid (and tasted like kerosene), there was not nearly enough of it, and some of the people assigned to be his co-workers were hardened criminals (one liked card games where the loser paid with his life, and tried to have him killed). And yet reading his story is not a morose pity party, but a tale of a saint's triumph. *And* Fr. Arseny lived with profound respect for his nasty co-workers and the people in charge of the camp, and found some spark of beauty, some reflection of God, in even the most blackened soul. And his tale is profoundly uplifting.

He knew the secret of in humility considering others better than himself. And he lived a joy unlocked by many holy keys, *including* a humility that lived respect for others.

3. Share.

There was one woman who posted a note to a forum I read, saying that after being distressed that she could not find work, she began volunteering and, if she had no money to give, gave her time to others. There is a seed of the Kingdom of Heaven in her response, and also a seed of how people survived the Great Depression.

I do not say that you should share a big gift that will make things all better. It is better to try starting off by giving a dollar or two when you know it is inadequate: if you can easily write a big cheque that will completely solve a problem, God may not really be working through you. Far from feeling a godlike power to put an end

working through you. Far from feeling a godlike power to put an end to suffering, most doctors feel powerless in the face of real suffering. (Are we more powerful than doctors?) But what about going to church and putting a dollar or two in the collection plate, even or especially if you cannot afford it, or if you do have a job, bring a meal—nothing fancy, a cheap meal is fine—to a friend or neighbor who cannot find work?

What brought a lot of people through the Great Depression was pulling together: in a situation where people could not live separate lives, dependent on wealth and independent from others, people pulled together and even if they had less, shared the little they had—as some people are doing, and discovering, today.

"He saved others, but he cannot save himself" is a definition of the Kingdom of Heaven, and some people who have been stripped of the treasures of wealth—no one-person cars, no fancy meals in restaurants, no iPhones and consumer electronics—have grown so poor that they have moved on to *real* treasures, the treasures of God, and communities pulling together, of love and service to others. (The best things in life are free!) They have been, perhaps, like children whose parents pulled them away from their beloved mud pies until it dawns on them that the reason their parents took them away from their mud pies wasn't cruelty at *all*—it was a vacation better than Disneyland.

4. Take the worst parking spot.

I remember a poster which encouraged people to "take the worst parking spot," out of a concern for physical health: if you are going to drive rather than walk, a minute or two extra walking is worth it. But taking the worst parking spot can also be excellent for our *spiritual* health. And our survival.

We often take as much luxury as we can have. And we are softened by it: we get new conveniences, and we find that we need them. Part of a good preparation for disaster is to wean ourselves, or at least try to weaken our dependency just a little. We become more independent even if we still use them.

What can we do besides take the worst parking spot? We can wear clothing we don't like, for one day only, or spend a weekend without touching a computer, or use desktop computers but leave our smartphones at home. The Orthodox ways of fasting from certain foods are in part a way to take the worst parking spot: the principle is, "Foods have their place but I want to be more spiritually independent and less ruled by my belly." It may be much more than this, but there is a core principle that is not only good for spiritual health when times are easy, but good for survival when times are hard.

How could you stretch your spiritual muscles? What could you do to "take the worst parking spot?"

5. Remember that life neither begins at 18 nor ends at 30.

In older Russian tradition (and, for that matter, older American tradition), children are held very dearly, and elders are held dearly too. One hears a lament that the Russian Orthodox Church has seminaries to form priests but no such schooling to make its devout old women. These elders are not looked on as has-beens but as treasurehouses.

One (American) friend has said that one decision that he has *never* regretted was that, for the last two years of his grandmother's life, he wrote her a letter each week. After she passed away, he learned that she kept the stack of his letters close by, in her bedstand.

If hard times strike, we will not be able to afford to segregate ourselves by age and market segment.

6. Live real life in a virtual world.

There are many good uses for technology: perhaps the good uses have no exotic sizzle, but technology has been used to support human life: the letter mentioned above uses the full technology of a postal system, online libraries make classic books available, forums work very well for certain discussions and cars and watches have

work very well for certain discussions, and cars and watches have their uses.

But using technology to escape basic spiritual discipline—I will elaborate shortly—is like using whisky to chase your blues away. However attractive it may seem, it will bite you in the end.

Using technology to anaesthetize boredom—to have the chatter of the TV on, or always be texting when you have time to kill—is using technology to avoid feeling uncomfortable and maybe practicing a little spiritual discipline. Something deep in older Russian tradition (but not really foreign to older American tradition) is the discipline of silence, a discipline of life without added distractions. It may be hard to explain what the advantage is of not carrying around distractions to anaesthetize boredom, but we grow in silence, and trying to become a mature and rounded person without working through waiting and silence (sometimes *uncomfortable* waiting and silence) is like trying to be healthy without cutting back on junk food or making a deliberate attempt to exercise consistently.

Today it is an exotic storybook image to ride a horse or live "in harmony with nature" in an old rural village where you saw peasants and a priest, guildsmen and maybe a knight; not long from now it may be a faroff, exotic storybook image to meet most of your friends face or show the harmony of nature to go in person to a university where people come face-to-face to study, teach, and learn like scholars had since medieval times, or work at a quaint "company" where telecommuting is not yet the norm. The ancient reality of face-to-face community *may* become more exotic than riding horses, but it is profoundly more important.

Growing spiritually has never been easy, but it's harder when technology makes it easier to dodge foundational lessons in the spiritual life. But the solution needs to go beyond what technologies we do and do not use. It is not about not-technology. It is about God; the stories of the saints are not stories about how most of them lived before our cherished technologies, but about how they lived and grew in the divine life. It is about their love for their neighbor, about

their prayer, and yes, about their letting go of luxuries: but one hardly walks away impressed with how deprived they were, any more than one learns of the struggles, training and victory of an Olympic gold medalist and says, "Wow, there was one deprived athlete!"

Virtual life is always at our fingertips, but the door to real life is and ever shall be open to us, whether our life is easy or hard.

7. Don't be a cowboy.

The U.S., more than most nations in history, has a rebel for its hero: a Western never has a tight-knit band of warriors sharing the limelight, but a lone, solitary cowboy. Its religious roots are Protestant, not really Catholic and far less Orthodox. And it's not just Protestants who may have more than a streak of the Independent Christian: the expression "American Catholic" has connotations of a sort of Burger King "Have it your way!" version of Catholicism where people announce, "Hi. I'll have an order of ritual, hold the guilt and authority, with a side of feeling extra special, and could we make it a bit more progressive?" This mentality is simply not helpful. There may be enough points of contact between, for instance, older Russian tradition and older American tradition, but being a cowboy Christian simply does not cut it.

Finding a good Orthodox parish can be hard, but it's worth it. A great many things about the spiritual walk are hard enough *with* the support of a good parish and priest—but much harder without.

8. Pray the [Psalms](#).

I had read through a couple of Shakespeare plays and simply not connected, and then went to a live performance of a play and was riveted. When I asked a Shakespeare-loving friend for his thoughts, he explained, "With due respect to my friends in the English department, Shakespeare (or at least most Shakespeare; I don't mean his sonnets) is not *literature*." I looked at him in puzzlement until he continued. "It's *drama*." That is, *Romeo and Juliet* is not in its living and dynamic form when it is read like a novel, but when it is

performed as live drama. Something like this is true for the Psalms: they are in their living and dynamic form not when they are merely read, but when they are prayed, chanted, or sung. And I know I've made the mistake of merely reading them when I should have been *praying* them.

The Psalms offer up the whole human life to the Lord: everything from exultant glory and thanksgiving to, "[My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?](#)" And I know that I, at least, don't know them well enough. I've done a couple of things; besides reading them, I have created the [Psalm Picker](#), which pulls a random Psalm each time you visit. It's something I made in the first place, not for other people, but first and foremost to help myself. There's also [the whole book of Psalms in the Powered Access Bible](#). And a trusty paper Bible is even better.

I hope to pray the Psalms more.

9. Make peace with death, and remember the fact that you will die.

Unlike Russian culture, either ancient or modern, American culture is in strong denial about death. Our medical system does not just prevent (or, rather, *postpone*) death; it hides it when it happens, and death is more off-camera than in most societies. There is a great, often unspoken, collective effort to avoid unpleasant reminders that (if the Lord tarries) each one of us will die. Denial is rarely a helpful way of coping with life or with death.

There is an alternative, and one can ultimately live one's whole life preparing to die. This is not morbid: if every moment brings us to death, it is unreal and therefore morbid to try to live as if this were not the case. Dying each day means in part not only realizing that our bodies will not live forever, and even that our bodies are aging day by day, but it also means dying to have our way: as in the Rolling Stones song, "You can't always get what you want." It is a dying that day-by-day gives birth to maturity and spiritual resurrection. And *this* is how we can avoid recoiling from aging and death as horrors we are trying to dodge: death, as well as life, is like a thistle: touch it timidly and it

will prick you, but grab it boldly, and its spines will crumble in your grasp. When Christ drank his cup to the dregs, there was no bitterness left in the cup: only resurrection that would trample death by death. Few of us get quite *that* far along while we are alive. Still, an imperfect job of facing death with resolve and acceptance is better than a perfect job of sticking your head in the sand. Whether we will die in gruesome circumstances or pass away peacefully in old age, we are all headed towards the grave that holds beggars and kings alike. Today is a good day to begin dying, to die to our self-will and graspingness, to die to how we would like to run the world, and to make peace with the fact that none of us will live forever and triumph over it in that peace. Our triumph comes by accepting it, not by running away from the thought, and if this is a difficult thing that takes years to accept, we might as well begin making peace with death now.

10. Read **from** the *Philokalia* ([Volume 1](#), [volume 2](#), [volume 3](#), [volume 4](#)).

The Philokalia is a classic anthology that has been very influential in Orthodoxy in recent years: the more recent classic [The Way of a Pilgrim](#) shows the place the *Philokalia* holds in the heart of Russian piety.

When I was an Evangelical, some of the biggest excitement we had was when we discovered something about how the spiritual life works, or where we read something that had its finger on the pulse of how spiritual life works. And I would add to both of those, "because both of them were something like the *Philokalia*." The *Philokalia* is not the only Orthodox theology and is not the only kind of spiritual writing out there, but it is, more than anything else I've read, the "science" of spiritual struggle and spiritual growth towards contemplation.

I don't want to give a heavy reading assignment, or give the sense that you must read the *Philokalia* cover to cover if you're serious. Many people would be better to dip into it now and then—or, even better, have sections suggested by a good priest (which is

probably more like how it was first used than simply reading it cover to cover). But a little bit each day can be very valuable, and I would underscore my remark that it is the "science" of spiritual struggle and growth.

11. Say, "Thank you!" But not like they do in *The Secret*.

For people who are not satisfied with their current clunker and wish they had a really nice car, the popular New Age book *The Secret* encourages people to imagine they were wrapping their hands around the leather steering wheel of a top-notch luxury car, and say "Thank you!" for the car they were attracting to themselves.

The Secret really does encourage saying "Thank you!" but never does it suggest we might say "Thank you!" for the things we already have: certainly the book never suggests that if we are dissatisfied with a regular car that works quite well, we might say "Thank you!" for the car we already have. And they seem to be pretty safe in their assumption that the reader who is invited to drool over a luxury car will not protest, "But I already have a car that works. Can't I say 'Thank you!' for the car that I have?"

All of us have a habit of being ungrateful. There was one time when I was a graduate student who had to choose between paying for medical care and paying for books, but many people who heard of my salary (a bit below \$15000) would be astonished and wish their village could have some fraction of that much wealth to share. And as the case may be, I *survived*. That's something to be thankful for, along with much bigger things: the love of friends, talents and virtues with which to love and serve, the grace of God, and a Heaven that begins in this life and is perfected in the next. There are any number of graces large and small, from being saved from a nasty situation, to eating for one more day, to that daily comic strip or funny story from a friend, to a pleasant chat with a loved one, to the pile of dirty clothes that belong to someone with more than one change of clothing. It is a profound mistake to think that if we lose our wealth we lose all that we have to be grateful for. Life may be harder. Indeed, it may be so hard that we start to appreciate how much we

still have to be grateful for!

We can thank God by praying aloud through Psalms and liturgical prayers (such those in the [Jordanville prayer book](#)), by keeping our eyes open to what we have to be grateful for and inwardly thanking God when we recognize a blessing, by spending time to "count your blessings," and by sharing with others out of grateful recognition of what we have received as gifts we have not earned.

12. Don't live for activism: live for sonship.

The Renaissance *magus* lived to transform the world, and the *magus* is the grandfather of the Western idea that it is worthy to transform the world. In the *magus's* eyes, society as it exists then and now is just a rather pitiable raw material which gains value when the *magus* starts improving it. The *magus* is also grandfather to statism and grand social programs: the idea that whatever problems a society may have, the solution is for the government to fix it.

The 19th century Russian great Nicolas Federov said, "Our social program is the Trinity." It may take some strained imagining to see the the Trinity as another secular program to improve society, but that's *almost* the point. The insight could also be restated, "If you look at the Trinity and think that a Church with the Trinity additionally needs a social program as well, you don't get it." In that sense Orthodox saying "Our social program is the Trinity." is like Amish saying, "Our medical system is a lifetime of hard exercise and healthy food," or devout Evangelicals saying "Our juvenile correctional system is families applying love and discipline to our children."

There are saints who have transformed the world, but this was a side effect of their seeking a life of sonship before God. To pick a Protestant example, one of the Wesleys believed that there were Christians, and then there were super-Christians, and then they were missionaries. So he crossed land and sea to be a missionary, and failed completely. He finally returned home as a defeated failure, and

while he was on the ship there was a tremendous storm. He heard the sound of singing from the deck, and when he asked the Christians on deck why they were singing in this deadly storm, they simply said that they believed in God. And the terrified Wesley broke down and wept. And after he had hit rock bottom, God used him as a tremendous force in American Christianity, but not before. Even if God did want to make a mark on the world through him, it was not nearly so important as having that Wesley sit at the Lord's feet in sonship. I know it is a tough lesson, but if God is at work with you, he will wait for you to flounder through your plans as an instrument to change the world for however long it takes for you to let go of them and approach him, not as a mere *instrument*, but as a *son*, and work out of sonship.

Sonship is a theme that may or may not be hit on today (not just because it may be seen as politically incorrect), but it is woven through the Bible. The New Testament does not just talk about the Son of God; it also talks about the sons of God, and there is an ancient maxim that the Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God. Don't live for a secular transformation of the world; live to let God transform you in sonship. Anything else is putting the cart before the horse, and it's hard to be practical and get a horse to keep pushing a cart in a straight line!

13. Empty yourself of noise.

All of the Christian walk is a walk of being emptied; to become of like mind with Christ is to empty yourself ([Philippians 2:5-11 RSV](#)):

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should

bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Other things in Orthodoxy involve emptying yourself (humility, for instance, or chastity), but here I would like to talk about emptying oneself of idle noise. The idea that idle chatter is something to avoid is not obvious because noise is indispensable to our way of life. We have not only noise in conversation and technology, but inner noise.

My priest has said more than once that when we are praying, we should not strive to have *good* thoughts, however good, but *no* thoughts. Heaven is silent, without our worrying and plans and schemes to have things our way, and a saint is not someone who has nothing to worry about or who has very good plans and has God's blessing on those plans, but someone in whom the silence of Heaven has taken root.

The place for this silence is not sometime in the future when, maybe, we imagine we will have nothing to worry about: it is now. There will always be something to worry about, but the [Sermon on the Mount](#) with its "Do not worry" does not say, "Here is how you should live life if everything goes your way," but "Here is how to live life now, in the situation you are in here and now."

I write this as a worrier who has just begun to experience the peace and silence of Heaven.

14. Mind more than what you eat.

The U.S. has been called a "toxic environment" for weight: it's not just supersized meals that make it easy, easy, easy to eat more than is good for you.

But what isn't talked about is that the toxic environment is more than oversized food portions: the toxic environment is in us, and if we understand it simply as a battle of willpower, we have *already*

lost. Perhaps you have bent over to uproot a weed and pulled until you almost strained yourself because you had not imagined what a root system that tiny-looking weed had. Overeating has a remarkably deep root system.

Do you watch a lot of television, for instance? What I am interested in here is not that the human body burns fewer calories watching television than sleeping; it is that, even if food is never even *mentioned*, watching television feeds the root system of overeating. Or are you big into fantasy? Playing obscure games? Chances are that you aren't a big TV watcher, but this feeds the root of the problem as well. Or are you interested in the occult? Do you read a lot of romance novels? Do you dally around with SecondWife? *Guess what?* You're doing the same thing.

"*Foul!*" I expect to hear: "*It's none of your business!*" And perhaps it isn't my business, personally, but this has every relevance to what we have to do if we are really going to uproot this weed.

The common thread running through all of these things—and more—is that they are different kinds of medication to provide a painkiller for our life. And if we want a painkiller to adjust life, we want it for all of our life: someone who wants a painkiller for constant backaches wants the pain to be continuously medicated away, not just every once in a while. This basic habit is one we can use with different drugs, and one of them is food. If we treat existence as something to medicate, and look for things to medicate it, then we may use food to medicate it—and it's awfully hard to say no to the pleasure of food, and staying in it as long as we can, if life is something we want medicated away.

This is what is missing if you are only told how many calories to take from what food groups and what food to avoid. If you are trying to use food and other things to medicate life, continuing in that basic attitude while trying to cut back is a nasty game: the only way to win that game is not to play at all. Not that it is easy to uproot the whole root system: trying to reject and progressively uproot using things like food to medicate is not an easy game at all. But it is a game that

can be won, and the prize is much better than a smaller waistline.

We're obsessed with waistlines. But the biggest cost of eating too much is *not* what it does to your waistline, but to your immortal spirit: people who indulge too deeply in physical sweetness lose the ability to enjoy or even seek spiritual sweetness. The lie that traps is to think that good is a way of delivering pleasure that happens to nourish the body. The truth that frees is to know that food is a way to nourish the body that happens to deliver pleasure. And there is more than this.

Fasting is good, but eating is a much more powerful good. One Orthodox bishop, in a place where there are many faithful but shockingly few clergy, gave advice to a community that rarely had a priest. He said two things:

- Keep meeting together.
- Eat together.

Family eating around a table is a powerful thing. Friends eating together is a powerful thing. Table fellowship is a powerful good, and we have not progressed because we have moved to individual meals fried in microwaves.

And this is leaving out the greatest meal of all. The Orthodox teaching is clear: Adam and Eve lost paradise by eating, and we are called back to paradise by eating. The Eucharist is the one sacrament from which every other sacrament flows, and it blesses our whole lives.

The ultimate alternative to a life that is medicated away is a life offered to God, and received back, under the brilliant, blazing shadow of the Eucharist. The unspoken command of "Do not escape" is not given to us for misery, but joy, given that we may find the paradise, here where God has put us, rather than in a doomed effort to escape. "Eucharist" comes from the Greek for thanksgiving, and it is a life unlocked by thanksgiving and in touch with the many things it can be thankful. The "bad" news is that you can't escape, but the

It can be thankful. The sad news is that you can't escape, but the good news is that you don't need to.

15. Don't live by throwing things away. Or at least cut back a bit. Living in a disposable world is not good for us, and it's definitely not going to help if disaster strikes.

One Ukrainian friend who immigrated to the U.S. wrote about defeating clutter, writing that her more Spartan husband, who is Russian, purchased few things, but then chose good quality items that was built to last. And this relates, perhaps somewhat strangely, to what another friend said about buying clothing: don't buy a shirt at Navy Pier because, however fashionable it may be, the shirt will wear out quickly. Just go to a second-hand store, and find something that may well "work like iron" because the clothing, even if it is second-hand, was made a time when clothing was *not* made to wear out. These two people's attitudes, of "Don't buy much, but buy high quality" and "Don't buy your clothes at Navy Pier: shop at second-hand stores" have a lot more in common than you might think.

The U.S. economy works by having people buy things more often, and part of this is that things are meant to break down (or go out of fashion, or become obsolete, or...). The disposable mindset is deeply enough rooted that even if Orthodox Christians really try to avoid throwing away "prophora" (bread that has been blessed), there is nothing like an Orthodox Jewish seminary practice of burying paper in a Jewish cemetery if it has the Divine Name or part of the Mosaic Law written on it. When we need to dispose of worn-out icons, we bury them according to canon law, but it is common practice to print bulletins with maybe an icon on the front and some bit of liturgy or Scripture inside, created to be used once and then thrown away. This is a major red flag.

One joke tells of a couple of students who wanted to try out marriage, for as long as they both shall love. And a professor who had warned them about treating marriage as something you can throw away *did* attend the wedding—and gave the gift of paper plates. A lot more is "disposable" in American culture than just paper

plates: we have disposable relationships, disposable personal philosophies, disposable jobs and careers. We assign a shelf life to almost everything. It is true that if the economy comes to a grinding halt, a stack of paper plates won't last very long. But we have other problems with disposable relationships, beliefs, and the like if disaster strikes. It's not just that, in a depression, disposable plates are a luxury you cannot afford: disposable relationships are a luxury you cannot afford, too, even more than disposable plates. Disposable relationships aren't exactly good for us even in good times, but then there's at least the illusion we can afford such luxuries. In a disaster we do not have even *that* illusion.

We need places to take root and deepen. Even warts have something to give to us: it is a mistake to think that saying we need to take root with people and communities is the same as saying that they will always be perfect. It has been said that a person knows the meaning of life when he plants a tree with the full knowledge that he will never live to sit in its shadow. That may be beyond most of us, but we can all strive for a little more permanency each day, each week, each month, each year, each decade.

16. Rethink harmony with nature.

In [Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature](#), I wrote about restoring some bygone age:

Here is what you might do one day to live a bit more like prehistoric Grecians, or ancient Celts, or medieval Gallic peasants, or whatever. Keep in mind that this is at best half-way to its goal, not a full-fledged return to living like an ancient in harmony with nature to a day, but making a rough equivalent by using what is closest from our world:

1. However exotic the setting may seem to you, remember that it is a fundamental confusion to imagine that the setting was exotic *to those inside the experience*. We not only meet new people frequently; we see new technologies invented frequently. In The Historic Setting,

people most likely were born, lived, and died within twenty miles, and even meeting another person who was not part of your village was rare. A new invention, or a new idea, would be difficult to imagine, let alone point to. So, for one day, whatever you're doing, if it feels exotic, avoid it like the plague. Stop it immediately. Don't read anything new; turn off your iPod; don't touch Wikipedia. Don't seek excitement; if anything, persevere in things you find boring.

2. Remembering that there was a lot of heavy manual labor, and stuff that was shared, spend your nice Saturday helping a friend move her stuff into her new apartment. Remember that while stairs were rare in antiquity, it would be an anachronism to take the elevator. Be a good manual laborer and do without the anachronism.
3. Remembering how the Sermon on the Mount betrays an assumption that most people were poor enough that houses would only have one room, spend your time at home, as much as possible, in one room of your house.
4. Remembering that the ancient world had no sense of "Jim's trying to lose weight and is on an old-fashioned low-fat diet, Mary's a vegan, Al's low carb...", but rather there was one diet that everybody day ate, go to McDonald's, order a meal with McDonald's McFries McSoaked in McGrease, and a sugary-sweet, corn-syrup-powered shake.

If you just said to yourself, "He didn't say what size; I'll order the smallest I can," order the biggest meal you can.

5. Remembering that in the ancient world the company you kept were not your eclectic pick, spend time with the people around you. Go to your neighbor Ralph who blares bad '80s rock because he thinks it's the best thing in the world, and like a good guest don't criticize what your host has provided—including his music. Spend some time playing board games with your annoying kid sister, and

then go over to visit your uncle Wally and pretend to tolerate his sexist jokes.

6. Lastly, when you head home do have a good night's sleep, remember that a bed with sheets covering a smooth mattress was only slightly more common than a Frank Lloyd Wright home is today, go to sleep on a straw pallet in your virtual one room house. (You can use organic straw if you can find any.)

This may seem, to put it politely, a way you would never have thought to live like an age in harmony with nature. But let me ask a perfectly serious question:

What *did* you expect? Did you imagine dressing up as a bard, dancing on hilltops, and reciting poetry about the endless knot while quaffing heather ale?

When we think of "harmony with nature", we often associate it with some exotic experience: it's like getting out of the office and going camping on vacation. Or maybe something more exotic and special than that. The idea that chores could be a form of harmony with nature—even the chores associated with technology and luxury—is almost inconceivable.

But there is a truer and deeper harmony with nature in a trip to the grocery or hardware store than an adventure vacation. One LinkedIn question was quite perceptive: it noted that in other days people hunted or gathered or farmed their food, and people's relationship to nature was not an extra, but the core of how life itself worked. Now it is an add-on and a special luxury: if we fish for our food on vacation, it is never simply how we can get food. It's almost like Wii warriors meticulously donning period-accurate athletic garb and playing frisbee as a full-fledged historical re-enactment, like a Civil War re-enactment.

There is a reason parents have assigned chores, and not just because the chores needed to get done. Persevering through chores instead of always having your way helps children grow to be mature

instead of always having your way helps children grow to be mature adults and not be spoiled brats. And it has a connection to the more ancient understanding of being in accord with nature, a deeper understanding that ultimately reached into virtue. (Not to mention that it's just a little bit more like what living off the land was like when there was no alternative!)

It may be that if something seems hollow about robotic pets (if not vampiric), it has something to do with a pet that needs no chores from you—no feeding when you don't feel like it, no arrangements if you are going to leave town, no cleaning out the litterbox. Your pet is there when you want to give it attention, but you can ignore it whenever you want. It is a pet on your terms, and it is entirely at your disposal. And it doesn't compare to the old-fashioned kind of puppy that whines when you want to leave it alone, misbehaves, and is alive enough to need you to do chores.

Learn to love your chores.

17. Don't have all your experiences made for you.

One of the computer professions that has been on the rise is "user experience", which is not exactly about getting the basics to work or even making things be friendly, but about creating a smooth and enchanting experience. This isn't just a computer thing: music, for instance, or movies have their own user experiences, but this sort of thing has been neglected with computers and is now coming into the limelight.

I've read a fair amount about user experience, but one article today drew my attention to something of a spiritual bad smell. It talked about "user enchantment" as a better way of looking at things than "user experience," and to explain the red flag, I would like to talk about experience and enchantment in Orthodox liturgy.

For many people, a first visit to an Orthodox Church may be an enchanting experience. Things look strange (dare I say *mystical*?): liturgy is chanted, there are pictures all around that may not look anything else they have seen, and different things happen. And this is

just on a material level. But for all this, the experience has things that a user experience professional aiming for enchantment would wince at. In many parishes, most people stand, and your first time standing for over an hour brings pain to your legs and back. And, if you come more than once or twice and want it to be exotic, you will find that it's not that exotic after a while. If you look for an experience that will simply be like Disneyland, you will almost certainly be disappointed.

Something about the pictures is hard to see. If you look at them in the hope that they will be normal pictures, you will be disappointed: the pictures look awkward and oddly proportioned, and that impression may last a while. What you may not guess at is that after something has happened, there is something in the pictures, or rather *icons*, that goes much deeper than famous oil paintings in museums. The icons are *windows of Heaven*, something like a fantasy portal or a time machine, or a meeting-place, and something *alive*. Heaven and earth meet there, and the reason that people do things with icons—offer kisses, for instance—is that they are not just a picture to look at on a wall, any more than an open doorway to the outside world is simply a tall picture of the world outside. But it takes spiritual sight to see this, and despite the images I have used, the experience is not exotic like getting swept off your feet by a movie's special effects is exotic.

What unlocks icons, and other things in Orthodox worship, is a gradual but lifelong process of transformation of which worship with the parish plays a *part*. It's a bit like saying that hitting a baseball on television is the result of years of disciplined practice. The point isn't to get to the experience of icons being alive and windows you can see through to Heaven; the point is a many-sided spiritual walk.

And the experience is not stand-alone. I have spoken about the experience of Orthodox worship, but the point is not to deliver an experience, but to transform people. The experience may be meticulously cultivated, and it *is* important, but it is one dimension of something deeper. It's not just that there are things you contribute, but it is somewhat myopic to make the experience the center.

This is not just true of Orthodox worship. It is true of human life: marriage, parenting, friendship, work, leisure, and more. You should be giving of yourself, it should hurt at times, and never is there a standalone experience delivered to you. And it is a much greater good than the kind of experience movies and music deliver.

For now we may have the luxury of standalone experiences being delivered to us. But seeking experiences is a way to create a dependence, and it is a dependence that does not prepare us for rough times. People in the Great Depression had marriage, parenting, friendship, and work. Few of them had iPods with music whenever they wanted.

And iPods wear out.

18. Treat your situation as a spiritual training ground.

In some monastic literature, one reads of spiritual fathers giving rather nasty orders ("obediencies") to their monks. At first brush, it seems to be cruelty, pure and simple. The more you understand it, the less cruel it is. These unpleasant "obediencies" may sometimes be bitter medicine, but they are the medicine of a physician. The purpose is to bring freedom to the monk: spiritual freedom that dwarfs political and economic freedom, the kind of freedom that even an icy labor camp could not take from [a monk, priest, and spiritual father like Fr. Arseny](#). And the entire of monastic life is meant to be a training ground where even the hard parts are there to build up the monastery's members.

This is a microcosm of life for all of us. It may be true, as some say, that all Orthodox are called to asceticism, not just monks, but there is a bigger point. All of us, whether or not we have the monastic kind of spiritual father, have an even bigger Spiritual Father, God, who arranges a spiritual training ground in this life. "All things work together for good" ([Rom 8:28 KJV](#)) for those studying, being trained, and being formed in the great spiritual academy called life. It's just a little easier to see when you understand monasticism as a training

ground.

This is easy enough to say as eloquent words and impressive rhetoric; it is much harder if your life has not been easy, you have been scarred by rough experiences, and it seems that random forces buffet you and knock you away from where you want to be. But let me give an analogy.

My brother, then working at a major internet corporation, mentioned that one of the system administrators, whenever a higher-up would come up to him and ask, "Is there a way to—" would cut him off and say, "Stop! Tell me what you want to do." Wanting to give an example, he described a manager saying, "Is there a way to run a `df` [an obscure Unix command that gives a page or two of information about disks] and send the output to a system administrator's pager?" And a terrible response would be for him to say, "Yes," at which point the manager would say, "Why don't you do that," and have him do something that would look good on paper to a manager, but not even look good on paper to a system administrator. The core issue, the "Tell me what you want to do," might be "A disk got too full recently", with an implication of "I don't want this to happen again. What can we do so system administrators can deal with this?" And there are things that could be done. Perhaps one might write a program to check if a disk is too full, and send a warning (perhaps even to a system administrator's pager), and another tool to sound an alarm if a disk is filling up quickly. But the Unix `df` command is not just obscure; it was much too verbose for the pagers of the day; even an excellent system administrator would have to do a lot of scrolling to find out if the page was a warning about a problem. So the solution as proposed is to cry "Wolf!" every five minutes, and make on-call system administrators do a lot of busy work to figure out if the constant cries of "Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!" actually correspond to a rare enough real problem. The system administrator mentioned by my brother did not like implementing solutions that were not in his employer's best interests, and what different managers were coming to him and saying, with "Is there a way to [*insert solution that only looks good on paper*]?" is, "I've

solved a problem badly, and I want you to implement it."

This is not just a story about managers and rude system administrators. It's also the story of much of our prayers: "God, I've solved a problem badly, and I want you to implement it." And we bitterly resist when God offers us something that actually *is* in our best interests. On the one hand, St. James tells us, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." ([James 4:3 RSV](#)) Our plans to have what we believe will make us happy have much to do with what it means to "spend it on your passions." On the other hand, Christ tells us, "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." ([John 15:2 RSV](#)) The "pruning", for many of us, means progressively liberating us from our plans to arrange what we think will make us happy. It is God, the Spiritual Father, ever seeking to spur us to grow up.

Blessed are they who struggle in earthly pain, for they may rest in Heavenly victory. Blessed are they whom God frustrates in their desires, for they may reach true satisfaction. Blessed are you when your earthly training ground includes suffering you would never have chosen, because in the same way God has trained legion upon legion of saints before us. Thank God, and ever pray for the spiritual sight to see his loving providence in your life.

19. However terrifying it may be to repent, repent anyway.

Sin is not the most popular term today; saying that we are all terrible sinners is not something we want to hear. But we have sins, and we need to repent of them.

One counselor wrote of a man who was preparing to break off an affair forever, and wept: he had come to the insight that what made it so hard to break things off was not because he was going to lose the woman he was having an affair with, but because he feared that "some shining part of him would be lost forever." This is a tiny slice of why the [Philokalia](#) says that *people hold on to sin because they think it adorns them*.

Repentance may be the most terrifying experience a human can adorn; sin is a disease of the soul, and part of its damage is that even if it makes us miserable we are afraid to let it go. Among Protestants repentance has been called "unconditional surrender", and this is absolutely true: lifelong repentance is lifelong surrender, and it is surrender more than once.

But there is another side to repentance. *Before*, it is terrifying and painful surrender. *Afterwards*, there is more than relief: you realize that what you were holding on to, because you thought it adorned you and you would not be able to live without it, was in fact a piece of Hell, and you needed it like you needed one foot stuck in a cruel bear trap. Orthodox speak of repentance from sin as awakening, and part of John the Baptist's proclamation, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here," is, "Wake up, for God's glorious reign is coming here." This is why St. Paul quotes, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." ([Ephesians 5:14 RSV](#)) Sin is sleep. It is also spiritual sickness, and for that matter it is worse than standing in something gross: and repentance is awakening, being healed, and stepping out of something vile and feeling truly *clean*—repentance is all of this and much more. It may be Heaven's best-kept secret.

What are you trying to forget you need to repent of? Call it sin, and repent of it.

20. Learn how to make things and make at least minor repairs.

One of the prominent present-day philosophers of virtue wrote [Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues](#). The argument is that in real life, dependency is a normal part of human life, and virtues help us with a real life that includes sickness and not being able to do everything you imagine.

One of those ancient virtues is thrift, and Dorothy Sayers's classic essay, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," talks about how thrift was always considered a virtue. Even if we can dodge this virtue, it's still not a good idea.

It is not that hard to check (or change) a car's oil or sew back a missing button, and if you don't know how to do these things, I'd encourage you to visit [a how-to site like eHow.com](#). You don't have to digest the whole site at once, but what might be a better idea is, when something minor breaks, instead of paying someone to fix it, see if you can fix it instead. And, for that matter, buy a basic cookbook (if you don't want to use the internet) and start cooking. (You might find that you start feeling better. If you cook food yourself, your body is running on a higher grade of fuel than horrid microwave dinners.)

21. If not now, when?

There is a temptation to believe, "Life will really begin when I grow up," or "when I get into college," or "when I get married," or "when I get a job," or on a smaller scale "when I get my next paycheck," or "when so-and-so comes to visit," or "when quitting time rolls around." Happiness is something we imagine in the future, and sometimes we don't really enjoy what we were waiting for: we have made our habit to be waiting, and we often find something else to wait for. This dirty secret may be enough of a secret that we don't even know it ourselves: it's just that when The Moment We've Been Waiting For finally rolls around, we find ourselves looking forward to another, more remote, Moment We've Been Waiting For. And we still believe, "Then I'll be happy."

There is profound wisdom in the [Sermon on the Mount's](#) words, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow" ([Matthew 6:34 KJV](#)). The issue is not just worrying; God keeps giving us this now and this today, and we exhaust ourselves trying to arrange our future and waiting for life to *really* begin. Perhaps there is some place for planning, but there is no place for being so preoccupied that you are not grateful for what God has given you today, and it is something of a missed opportunity to keep pushing back the date when life really begins. Paradoxically, the best way to arrange for contentment when you cross the next big threshold is to begin living that contentment in this now that God has given us (a now, incidentally, in which many of the things you were waiting for have already been given).

The Sermon on the Mount, in saying not to borrow trouble from tomorrow because "each day has enough trouble of its own," is giving very practical advice. The [Bible](#) says a great deal to the modern world: in stress management terms, it says, "Do not give yourself double stress by adding tomorrow's stress to today's stress. Today has enough stress by itself." The more stressful things get, the more essential it is to cut needless stress. And it is very hard not to keep being preoccupied with tomorrow in stress if you are preoccupied with tomorrow whenever you look for happiness. Eternity and Heaven are in this *now* that God has given us.

Don't say "This sounds great," and decide to start tomorrow. Start today.

22. Don't wonder why you don't have a good enough [*fill in the blank*]. Wonder instead why you have a [*fill in the blank*] that you are unworthy of.

We live in an economy fueled on discontent: advertisements are designed with the powerful unstated purpose of making us discontent with what we have. And discontent has become a way of life. It is no longer mere possessions that we are discontent with: even friendships and family are the sort of thing we wish we could trade up for something better.

"Who is rich? The person who is content," reads one church sign, and it's true. Advertisements perversely promise exactly what they take away: they invite you to be discontent so you can "trade up" in the hope that something better will give you the contentment they beckoned you to cast away.

Think it would be nice to be a king in the Middle Ages? Here's something to think about. In those days, the higher up you were on the pecking order, the less physical exertion you was expected of you. *However*, royalty needed to do more physical exertion than one would expect of a middle class exercise enthusiast today. If you wish you were a king in the Middle Ages, why don't you sit down and try to make a list of the luxuries you have today that no medieval king

could even dream of? The list doesn't just include an obsolete computer or even a car that breaks down. To pick just the area of plumbing, hot and cold running water were unimaginable, like it would be unimaginable today to have a faucet that would pour out clothing whenever you want. Nor would a king have had daily showers / baths to have a body that didn't smell: a gamy-smelling body was just part of the picture. Nor would there be an indoor toilet that so cleanly removes unpleasant odors. Armchair fantasies of being a king are one thing, but there are things no king could dream of that we take for granted.

Instead of taking things for granted and pining for possessions, or friends, or whatever else that are "worthy" of us, why not be not only thankful but mindful of our many blessings?

It is [a strangely joyful thing to realize how many good things God has given us that we do not observe.](#)

23. Live in the real world. (Wishful thinking doesn't really help.)

C.S. Lewis scholar Jerry Root wrote, [C.S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme](#). The book is a study of how C.S. Lewis treats "subjectivism": trying to choose your version of reality over God's. Subjectivism is the belief that corresponds to being curved in on yourself in narcissism and pride.

Root's readable scholarship looks both at Lewis's nonfiction work, but four works of fiction from different decades of his life. The villains all act and talk like subjectivists, and the villain in "Dymer", a magician who has taken the hands off a clock because he does not want to be subject to time, calls to mind for me my own subjectivism/narcissism/pride in employing almost the same image in [A Personal Flag](#).

The Greek word *hubris* refers to pride that inescapably blinds, the pride that goes before a fall. And subjectivism is tied to pride. Subjectivism is trying, in any of many ways, to make yourself happy by being in your own reality instead of learning happiness in the

God-given reality that you're in. Being in subjectivism is a start on being in Hell. Hell may not be what you think. Hell is light as it is experienced by people who would rather be in darkness. Hell is abundant health as experienced by people who would choose disease. Hell is freedom as experienced by those who will not stop clinging to spiritual chains. Hell is ten thousand other things: more pointedly, Hell is other people, as experienced by an existentialist. This Hell is Heaven as experienced through subjectivist narcissism, experiencing God's glory and wishing for glory on your own power. The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the *inside*. God is love; he cannot but ultimately give Heaven to his creatures, but we can, if we wish, choose to experience Heaven as Hell. The beginning of Heaven is this life, but we can, if we wish, be subjectivists and wish for something else and experience what God has given us as the start of Hell. When I foolishly wished I could live in the Middle Ages, I found the contemporary abundance around me drab, and that is a bit of how God can offer us joy and we can experience it as Hellish. Whether you experience the temptation exactly as I do, or in a different form, the end is always the same. And trying to be somewhere else than reality, even in your mind, is only a liability in dealing with the only reality that counts.

If you want to cope successfully even in a disaster, live in the real world you as you are in it.

24. Don't kick against the goads, and that includes in matters of sex, men, and women.

When I was an undergraduate, I gleefully passed on what I had heard, all the more gleefully as it seemed an opportunity to take a stand against wrongful prudishness: a friend, in class, had heard a professor lecture against alleged [ludicrous Victorian prudish advice to brides](#), advising brides-to-be to "GIVE LITTLE, GIVE SELDOM, AND ABOVE ALL, GIVE GRUDGINGLY."

I had gleefully retold the story to over a dozen people until the deflating experience of hearing a friend, whose judgment I otherwise respected, express skepticism about whether it held the ring of truth.

Now, some years later after I have developed more of an interest in history, his skepticism makes sense. The external details all look right, at least at first pass, but the letter is too crisp, too clean, and too perfect. It is too perfect in a way where real historical sources seem to be intractably messy and hard to pin down. There is not a single sentence which does not create or contribute to an effect of more-than-idiotic sexual prudishness and hatred of sexual pleasure. I've read a number of historical sources where the author was suspicious of how deep a good sexual pleasure really is—and not one of them is like this. Some contain even more striking statements—but not one contains sentence after sentence that reads as ludicrous to the modern reader. It's not just a historical forgery; that's almost a surface detail. It gives the impression that someone Wanted to Take a Stand Against Sexual Prudishness, picked a time frame associated with Sexual Prudishness, namely the Victorian era, and wrote for no other purpose than to impress the modern reader with how absolutely ludicrous Sexual Prudishness in any form really is.

Fast-forward a decade and a half. Retro aesthetics have resurrected 1950's black-and-white photography, or photos made to look to us today like they had been taken in the 1950's. Photoshop is on the scene, and hobbyists can make photoshopped images and send them to the web or email. And one of the things passing around the net now is the, um, uh, *authentic* [The good wife's guide](#), complete with the, um, uh, *authentic* words "Advertising Archives" next to the retro picture of a wife happily greeting her husband. However convincingly ragged the *visuals* may look, the *advice* is too crisp, too clean, and too perfect in its offensiveness, and where every sentence in the other forgery—the alleged Victorian advice ("alleged", as in *Monty Python's* "alleged Hungarian-English phrase book") for brides-to-be—is apparently written to impress the reader with how ludicrous Sexual Prudishness is, *every single suggestion* in the more recent "discovery" appears written as if to rile up feminists today. (Even if feminists today might not approve of real 1950's advice to housewives, the 1950's-ish [Letters to Karen](#) is absolutely *nothing* like this.) It appears that someone wanted to impress readers with How Bad Sexism Really Is, picked a time frame popularly associated with

How Bad Sexism Really Is, and wrote a forgery (even if "forgery" isn't really the point) designed to impress today's reader with How Bad Sexism Really Is.

These kinds of forgeries reveal something, but not about the Victorian era or the 1950's: people who pick the Victorian era or the 1950's as a popular emblem of something they hate rarely have a particularly empathic understanding of the time period in question, even if they do a good imitation of its external trappings. But that's only half the story. They do take in a lot of people and spread far and wide, and that reveals something about the audience that repeats them.

I'll leave treatment of Bold Denunciations of Sexual Prudishness to the last volume of Foucault's history of sexuality; what I am interested in is not only why [The good wife's guide](#) would be created in the first place, but why it would spread like wildfire, as it manifestly has. The answer has to do with a way we are kicking against the goads.

[The good wife's guide](#) is very revealing. It tells something about the sort of society where it would be so quickly passed on. It tells something about us.

If you've had the misfortune to hear enough dirty jokes, you may notice that when a "beautiful woman" occurs in a dirty joke, unless it's a feminist joke, she does not correspond to the psyche of *any* woman you know. In most dirty jokes, a "beautiful woman" is not a whole person, but something else, the other "person" implied by male desire in its unrefined, unchanneled state. The academic term is "implied other", as when Orientalist Westerners project onto the East the mirror image of what they imagine as Western tendencies: a projection that tells much more about the West than Asia. And here is fleshed out the "implied other" to a decently broad group of feminism as it exists in popular culture today.

If the question is, "Who does feminism see as the enemy?" the best answer is not "Sexist men." Nonfeminist men may be treated as

part of the problem rather than part of the solution, and some feminist writing may speak fondly of castration, but the real enemy is wives who stay home, raise children, and may write [a blog about passionate homemaking](#), but don't want anything more, or rather "more" (the assumption being that an independent, at least part-time professional career is an acceptable aspiration for a woman, but being a stay-at-home mom is despicable). Feminists may take offense at nonfeminist men, but not like nonfeminist women.

Feminism kicks against the goads. Of all the ways that Christians kick against the goads today, I don't know of any that are as acceptable to people, or at least an agree to disagree matter, as feminism or Biblical egalitarianism. If I were to go through queer readings of key passages, I could say that the scholarship is misusing cultural context to neutralize the passages in the Bible where God vetoes their claim, and hold up the scholarship as an example of subjectivist adjustment of Tradition to fit contemporary ideologies. I could pointedly say that every single queer interpretation I've read uses cultural context as a drunken man uses lampposts—for support rather than illumination. And if I were to do this, the more liberal scholars would challenge me, but most conservatives and moderates would be sympathetic, or at least open, to my argument. But if I were to make the same arguments about Biblical egalitarian scholarship, I would hear cries of "*Foul!*", cries that I was imposing something political on the study. But I've spent a lot of time reading Biblical egalitarian scholarship closely—read through everything I could find in Tyndale's library (on one point) and written a thesis, as well as reading queer scholarship under liberal scholars—and even if the conclusions are different, the scholarship is disturbingly similar. And subjectivist scholarship is a red flag: it is a red flag for socially unacceptable queer scholarship, and it is also a red flag for perfectly socially acceptable egalitarian scholarship. The fact that egalitarianism is seen as a normal position, entirely consistent with being the sort of person who can say the Creed without crossing his fingers, may be a fact about our cultural and historical context but does not change the reality of kicking against the goads.

I've written above that it is a good thing to learn how to cook, for

instance, and sew, and change a car's oil. Doesn't that mean androgyny? Well, I cook, sew buttons and have used sewing machines, change my car's oil, fix flats, and lift weights. Sounds a bit androgynous, and I would like to reply to that. (And not just by saying that I work in a male-dominated field where the odds are good but the goods are odd, and for that matter I've lifted weight machines.)

Neither masculinity nor femininity come from imitating what we think the 1950's were like, nor will they come from any other historical reconstruction. What they do come from is not easy to say. Stephen Clark tried to answer that question in [Man and Woman in Christ](#) (online edition of a thick book). Clark is quite conservative, and he asserts that simple repetition of the past is impossible. He offers few neat boxes: he does *not* give a simple endorsement of a husband working and a wife staying at home. What he says is rather messy; the only clean statement he makes on that point is that the arrangement of "The husband works a full-time job; the wife works a full time job, and in addition she does all the housework," is clearly condemned (even if it is the most common arrangement). In step with his argument, feminists complain about housewives suffering from depression, this may be because having a woman destitute of adult company for over eight hours a day is *not* truly traditional; in older traditional societies women were in adult company during the day, and may have had much less depression. For reasons like this, Clark gives a rather serious analysis but seems to always end with messy recommendations.

This messiness is appropriate. I've tried to explore this in some of my writing: both in essays like [Knights and Ladies](#) and longer fiction like [The Sign of the Grail](#). And the best answer I can give after my own digging is, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you."

But why am I claiming that feminism kicks against the goads? Journalist Wendy Shalit's [A Return to Modesty](#) is first about modesty and second about feminism, and it is an exposé of how immodest

living such as feminism has encouraged is a recipe for women's heartbreak. In that regard, it offers detail into a remark in a counselor's book on friendship, on how in years of practicing psychology in California he has seen every sexual arrangement you could imagine, and the more he sees, the more convinced he is that the rules God has given are intended to help us and not to harm us. Shalit discusses how sleeping around and hooking up rips up women: their modesty is still there, but it is driven underground and clogging the pipes with vomit. Not that she is setting out to criticize feminism: Shalit was delighted to meet Mary Daly and to have Daly sign Shalit's copy of Daly's *Wickedary*. But when feminism says that old-fashioned modesty and chastity are not good enough for today's women, Shalit says, "No." She exposes how abandoning the protection of modesty is kicking against the goads. And this is not the only way feminism kicks against the goads.

There's an old joke about a boy whose parents were trying *very* hard not to raise him with any gender preconceptions; his mother worked as a pilot. Someone asked if he wanted to fly airplanes when he grew up, and he said, "No, that's women's work!" And that may be funny, but it is not funny to find out that when kibbutzes ran their experiment on raising children free from sexist preconceptions, the result of this grand experiment was children who were as confused as any about who they were and what it meant to be human. And there are other signs that the kibbutzes were kicking against the goads. Some of their best efforts to free women from traditional behavior kept finding more traditional behaviors that were

Let's return to what we are supposed to think is the only real alternative to feminism. [The good wife's guide](#) shows a caricatured "other" that we are to react against, and realize that a woman should be concerned for herself alone, should push back against traditional expectations. The "good" wife we are to react against has no hopes, needs, desire, or personhood of her own; she absolutely does not contribute to shared life with her husband except as an empty slave, and there is not a shadow of the traditional Christian "two shall become one" that can mean anything but unilateral absorption of the

wife into the husband. And something of the fallacy of the excluded middle is at play: one gets the impression that progressive feminism, and [The good wife's guide](#), represent the two basic options: up-to-date feminism, and a caricature that is no closer to nonfeminist women's aspirations than a "beautiful woman" in a dirty joke matches the psyches of real women.

It tells something, not about the 1950's, but about us that today's pop feminism confuses a beautiful-woman-as-in-a-dirty-joke version of 1950's advice to housewives with a real glimpse into the soul of the Bad Old Sexist 1950's. To be a little more picturesque, [The good wife's guide](#) is the Bad Old Sexist 1950's as today's pop feminism would like to jack off to it, as the example of alleged Victorian sexual prudishness was before it. The joke ain't on the Victorian era or the 1950's. It's on us.

I wrote above that we shouldn't believe spam when it tells us that we need replica luxury watches. Truth be told, we also shouldn't believe spam that tells us how empty our lives are without Viagra and its kin. I thought I knew several happily married couples in their seventies, and I thought I heard the consistent claim that they were more and more happily married as the years wore on, so that each decade of marriage was better than the last. But my old pharmacy knows better, or say they do; they clearly inform readers that you can't be happily married if you lose 17-21 year old desires. Or maybe the pharmacy is, in fact, *wrong*. There is a great spiritual force bombarding us; it urges on women a feminist duty of stepping outside of modesty and chastity, and into a world of heartbreak; though this is hardly feminist, it urges another kind of heartbreak on men bombarded by spam which hawks porn that is in the beginning as sweet as honey and is in the end as bitter as gall and as sharp as a double-edged sword, as those who have fought addiction to porn can attest.

God has created us men and women, and we are trying to escape this fact and ancient wisdom about how to best live as men and women. And we live in a time where, as in feminist fairy tales, we are working hard to subvert what we were given.

It still hurts to kick against the goads.

25. "Put not your trust in princes." ([Psalm 146:3 KJV](#))

Barack Obama may well have unearthly charisma unlike any other U.S. President, ever. I've never heard of anyone else needing to quip, "Contrary to popular opinion, I have not walked on water, nor was I born in a stable." It may be one thing to approve of his achievements or his policies, but it is another to start believing in him as one believes in God—such as "Change you can believe in," and "Yes, you can!" seem to invite. Of course it would be just as bad to believe in John McCain that way, only he does not have such an enchanting charisma, and it's a whole lot harder to confuse him with a Messiah.

[The Bible](#), alongside human experience, warns about putting too much trust in political leaders, even when leaders were much less charismatic and people were much less inclined to look to governments to be their saviors. Government has its place, but please do not believe in it as you should believe in God. Governments will all ultimately fail us, and it's best not to be caught off guard.

If you believe government is not to be trusted too far, and your government fails you, you have a problem. But if you trust government as a savior and your government fails you, you have *two* problems. *When*—not *if*—something goes awry, it's really better to have just the *one* problem, and look to God for your salvation.

26. Waste not, want not.

For now, we've been taught to waste, so that it is normal to throw perfectly good things into the trash / recycle bin. This wastefulness has never been good for us as humans, but the poorer we get, the less waste we can afford.

There is a story about a young man who was on a boat who was sinking, and told his friend, "Help! Show me how to swim—I don't know how!" But the time to learn how to swim is not when you are

on a sinking boat, and it is better to learn how to cut down on unnatural waste when you can.

27. Beware of subjectivism in the small.

In Orthodoxy there is a *watchfulness*: an inner mindfulness that guards the heart. Learning this watchfulness, however imperfectly, is a foundational aid in spiritual growth and repenting from sin.

This watchfulness helps uproot problems when they are just a little thought or desire, and uproot them as soon as possible. This applies to anger, to lust, and to the subjectivism in the small that is also called wishful thinking.

The saying, "Procrastination is the thief of time," is true, and it wasn't until I started fighting procrastination that I understood why people would say that—and finally realized how much work *and* leisure time I was losing to the useless time sink of procrastination. I still procrastinate some, but I procrastinate less, and that makes a tremendous difference.

On more of a microscale, there are times that I wasn't *exactly* procrastinating in the sense of dodging work with Facebook, playing games on company time, or making excessive non-professional conversations, but after I read [Jerry Root's study of subjectivism as treated by C.S. Lewis](#), I started finding subjectivism even in things I wouldn't think to hide if someone walked by. For one example, part of my job is troubleshooting computer software. When I had created some new feature and it didn't work, I almost always tested the problem a time or two or three more before starting to investigate why it didn't work. The reason? However irrational, I was hoping that the problem would go away if I tried again. Not that double-checking can never have the right motive; sometimes trying again is the best thing to do. But my motive was wrong, and I was wasting too much time checking. My motive was wishful thinking, wishing the problem would go away so I wouldn't have to do the hard work of fixing the problem at its source, and this "subjectivism in the small" is no help to my productivity at work. As things are, I noticed a sharp

productivity boost when I started exercising watchfulness and began fighting this wishful thinking.

I doubt if this is just an Information Technology issue. The advantage of learning to fight your "subjectivism in the small" is important enough in good times but all the more in a bad economy. [Proverbs 22:9](#) says, "Do you see a man who is diligent/skillful/swift in his work? He will stand before kings, he will not stand before obscure men." If you're unemployed, this is relevant to a jobhunt where it may be hard to stay on task after a demoralizing string of rejections. If you're trying to hold on to your job, this could also help.

28. Remember why you are on earth.

The Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" and answers, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." This is the question that sets the stage for everything else. It is an exceptionally well-chosen opening that puts first things first.

There is a saying among some Protestants, "Mission exists because worship does not." And I misunderstood it at first, but the point is this: God does not create people so that they can be missionaries. Absolutely no one is created for that purpose. Everyone is created, not for the purpose of being a missionary, but for the sake of worshiping God. However, there are some people who are not in a position to worship God; they cannot do what they were made for. *Therefore*, Christians are responsible for mission and some Christians should be missionaries.

It is in the same spirit that one might say, "Asceticism, or spiritual discipline, exists because contemplation does not." This work is largely about asceticism in its concrete forms, but God did not create us for asceticism; he created us to contemplate him: in the language of the Catechism, "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." But we ourselves may not be in a position to contemplate God fully; we need the cleansing, the surgery, of asceticism. If asceticism exists because contemplation does not, all Christians are responsible for asceticism and *all* Christians should be ascetics.

But however important asceticism may be, it is not an end unto itself. Contemplation shines through it; for that matter, asceticism is what contemplation looks like when it puts on work gloves and starts scrubbing. Asceticism and contemplation are at the heart of the Orthodox maxim, "Save yourself and ten thousand others around you will find salvation." To Protestants, this may sound like a warped prescription for missions, but it has a lot to do with how [St. Herman of Alaska](#) and other missionary monks brought Orthodoxy from Russia to Alaska. Asceticism for the sake of asceticism is missing the point, and however much asceticism may contribute to survival, it's not enough to just view asceticism as a survival tool. Asceticism is for the sake of contemplation. Survival, missions, and ten thousand other things all fall under the umbrella of, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." ([Matthew 6:33](#))

29. Use money, but don't trust it.

[Proverbs](#) says money is not to be trusted: "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death," "He who trusts in his riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf," "Riches do not last for ever," "Do not toil to acquire wealth; be wise enough to desist." Money seems like a way to control the riskiness of life, but part of human existence is that we will never be in control. We need to be at peace with not being in control, and be at peace with being under God's care.

God's hand shows more strongly and more plainly when we have little power than when it seems we can get along well enough without him. People who have no blanket of wealth, and those who face great danger, seem to see providence much more clearly. If praying "Give us this day our daily bread." is a ritual formality to us, we will gain, not lose, the meaning of these words if we can no longer buy a month's food at once. We may exhaust our money, but we can never exhaust God or his care for us.

If you have money, try to use it well, but do not fear that all is lost if you only lose money. You may see God's providence as you

have never known it before.

30. Dig deeper than "Eat, drink, and be merry."

The movie *Dead Poets' Society* enchants the reader with what may seem to be a tremendous summons to the fullness of life. And it is not an accident that the movie's celebration of life has the teacher showing students old pictures of athletes who are all dead. A form of "Eat, drink, and be merry" is quoted with warning in the Bible: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" ([I Corinthians 15:32 RSV](#)). This "exhortation" is no more an exhortation to true joy than students saying before a wickedly tough high school physics test, "Be sure to write your name at the top of the page, because that's the only two points you're going to get." G.K. Chesterton writes, "It is the *carpe diem* religion; but the *carpe diem* religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people. Great joy does, not gather the rosebuds while it may; its eyes are fixed on the immortal rose which Dante saw." Chesterton lived and died decades before *Dead Poets' Society*; it's odd that his words in [Heretics](#) read so much like a reply.

However bad things get, don't believe that grasping all-too-fleeting pleasures is all you can get. Don't sell yourself short with, "Be sure you put your name at the top, because those are the only two points you are going to get." The best things in life, now as ever, are free: friendship, family, the different loves, God, grace and providence, wisdom, rightly used suffering. Some very nasty things may happen, and they may take away what we think are the best things in life. But it's good to remember what's important in life, and the best things in life are free.

31. Ignore brands.

One teacher asked his students, "Imagine your successful self in the future. With which brands do you see yourself associating?" He looked, and saw no raised eyebrows, no puzzled looks, and certainly no one offended by the question or its implications. All of the students answered it as a straight question, and all of them succeeded in identifying brands that their successful future selves

succeeded in identifying brands that their successful future selves would fit in with.

This teacher mentioned this in writing about how the brand economy does the job today that spiritual disciplines did in earlier ages. He never to my memory used the term "ersatz," but identifying with a brand is all too often an ersatz spiritual discipline. Russian Orthodoxy is shaped by prayer and fasting, and America's orthodoxy is shaped by iPods and Coke. And people say, "I'm a [*name of brand*] person," and no one really seems to ever be offended.

Sometimes some brands are better: if you are buying an external hard drive, I would recommend Seagate over Western Digital. But I would really wince at saying, "I am a Seagate man;" I may appropriately understand myself as a man, as an Orthodox Christian, as having certain people for friends and family, and in other ways as well, but *not* define my identity by a brand of hard drive. And brand loyalty often exceeds what the products justify. You know all those Chevy fans' bumper stickers that show Calvin relieving himself on the Ford logo? The fanaticism goes well in excess of the functional superiority of the average Chevy over the average Ford, if any such superiority exists. Almost certainly one of the better Chevies is better than one of the worse Fords, and one of the better Fords is better than one of the worse Chevies. Even if Chevies tend to be slightly better than Fords, this is *not* a rational comparison of mere material tools. It's buying into an identity.

For some of us, the items we need to buy are almost branded: it's a tall order to walk into an electronics store and ask for an a computer that is unbranded. And for things that are available in generic, buying generic may or may not be the best purchase. I can hardly say, "Don't buy branded merchandise." But what I can say is, "Don't buy into the *mystique* of branded merchandise, and never let brands become your spiritual discipline." And practice all the classic spiritual disciplines: reading the Bible, going to church, praying, fasting, silence, giving to the poor, repentance, and the like. Brands are a distraction from these, and we need true asceticism, not ersatz spiritual discipline.

32. Limit your exposure to advertising.

Some years ago, I used to say that a television is the most expensive appliance you can buy. The reason? All appliances have an up front cost, and there are electrical bills to pay, and maybe repairs. But the expense is usually limited; an air conditioner may take a lot of electricity, but you pay your electric bill and the expense is paid.

A television, by contrast, costs more than sticker price, electricity, repairs, and perhaps today removal expenses when you want to get rid of it. A television exposes you to the most effective propaganda in history: commercial advertising meant to manipulate you to buy, buy, buy, and seek your happiness in one product after another, always discontent. An article from *The Onion* tells us,

Amazing New 'Swiffer' Fails To Fill The Void

CINCINNATI-The blank, oppressive void facing the American consumer populace remains unfilled today, despite the recent launch of the revolutionary Swiffer dust-elimination system, sources reported Monday.

The lightweight, easy-to-use Swiffer is the 275,894,973rd amazing new product to fail to fill the void-a vast, soul-crushing spiritual vacuum Americans of all ages helplessly face on a daily basis, with nowhere to turn and no way to escape.

"The remarkable new Swiffer sweeps, dusts, wipes, and cleans with a patented electrostatic action that simply cannot be beat," said spokeswoman Judith McReynolds, media-relations liaison for Procter & Gamble, maker of the dustbroom device. "Whether it's vinyl floors, tile, hardwood, ceilings, or stairs, the incredible Swiffer quickly cleans any dry surface by attracting and trapping even the tiniest dirt and dust particles."

"The incredible Swiffer's extendable telescoping action has just what it takes to cut clean-up time in half," McReynolds continued. "Say goodbye to tedious dusting chores forever... the

Swiffer way!"

Upon completing the statement, McReynolds was struck, as she is most days, with a sudden, unbearable realization that she has wasted her life.

Despite high hopes, the Swiffer has failed to imbue a sense of meaning and purpose in the lives of its users.

"The new Swiffer, as seen on TV, requires no spray or chemical cleaners, so I'm sure you can understand how excited I was to finally find something that could give my sad, short existence a sense of worth," said Manitowoc, WI, homemaker Gwen Hull. "When you finish the clean-up job, simply tear off the patented Swiffer Cloth and throw it away-as easy as one, two, three. But when I did this, tossing the soiled, disposable Swiffer Cloth into the garbage can like so many hollow, rejected yesterdays, I thought to myself, 'Is that it? Aren't I supposed to feel more fulfilled than this?' It all felt so futile. I felt like that Swiffer Cloth in the trash represented me, my hopes and dreams made manifest. I felt like it was my goals and aspirations for a better life that were lying there in the garbage, never to be heard from again."

"I felt so alone," added Hull, loosening her grip on the Swiffer's convenient extendable handle-which can reach even the tightest corners-causing the product to fall to the floor. "So very, very alone."

Bridgeport, CT, homemaker Christine Smalls tries in vain to overcome her clinical depression using the amazing new Swiffer sweeper.

Hull's reaction was echoed by fellow Swiffer owner Glenn Pulsipher. A 45-year-old telemarketing coordinator for a Van Nuys satellite TV company, he said his recent Swiffer purchase has proven to be an ineffective void-filling measure.

"Ever since my divorce nine years ago, I'd been meaning to

keep this place a little more clean and presentable for visitors," said Pulsipher, who last had a houseguest in April 1997. "But with all the different sprays and sponges you have to use, who has the time? But when I saw the Swiffer ad on TV, I thought to myself: Wow, all that cleaning power in one simple, easy-to-use tool! And such a bargain! I guess I thought that maybe if I bought one, my life would be easier, more fun, more special. Well, I thought wrong."

"Not that it doesn't work," Pulsipher added. "It does: It works exactly like they said on TV. But after using it once or twice, the sad fact was I no longer cared."

"Why would I?" he continued, sinking into his living-room La-Z-Boy to watch ESPN alone for the 478th time this year. "I mean, it's a dustbroom. What more is there to say?"

"Dust in the wind," said Pulsipher, his voice taking on a muted tone of resignation as the TV blared. "That's all our various pitiful and deluded human endeavors ever amount to in the end. My job, my marriage-dust. All dust. And all the Swiffers in the world can't sweep it all up."

Many Swiffer owners have attempted to bolster the fleeting satisfaction the product offers with other Swiffer-related activities, but to no avail. In the past four weeks, more than 40,000 aching empty consumers have logged on to www.swiffer.com to download pages of "Swiffer FAQs" and "Useful Tips" on optimal Swiffer use. Also widely downloaded was the tour schedule for the "Swiffer Mobile," a Swiffer-themed truck-complete with promotional displays, demonstrations of anti-dust technological innovations, and a stated mission to "examine the mundane task of housecleaning under the keen eye of science"-which will travel to 20 markets across the U.S. this summer. None of these efforts, however, have met with anything but crushing, soul-depleting disappointment and failure.

The hope that the right product will one day come along and bring happiness to consumers' lives is a longstanding American tradition. However, the Swiffer's failure to fill the void has led some to doubt that any product, no matter how revolutionary and convenient, will ever do so.

"It's time we woke up and realized that the wait is never going to end," said Dr. James Ingersoll of the D.C.-based Institute For American Values. "The void is never, I repeat, never going to be filled by something we see on TV and can order with our credit cards."

For others, however, there remains hope.

"Just because the Swiffer and the other 35 new products I've bought over the past three months haven't filled the void, that doesn't mean the next product won't be the one," said Minneapolis homemaker Ellen Bender. "I just ordered the new HyperVac Advanced CyberCarpet CleanWare System, and I just can't wait until it arrives and completely transforms my flat, unsatisfying life."

Procter & Gamble offered its apologies to those who had pinned their hopes on the new dustbroom.

"We are deeply sorry for the Swiffer's failure to ease the crushing ennui faced by U.S. consumers, and we promise to redouble our efforts to one day develop a product that will succeed in soothing your tortured souls," a statement released by Procter & Gamble read in part.

What more is there to say?

Try to avoid the manipulative illusions in advertising.

33. Avoid Facebook at work.

Facebook can be rightly used: for instance, to log on, get a friend's contact information, and log off. And of course if you are

your company's representative on Facebook, you shouldn't stay off of Facebook. But both of these cases represent an atypical use of Facebook. The usual use of Facebook is as an absorbing place where you don't notice the passage of hours. And there is something there that doesn't belong at work, and should at least be used in moderation outside of work.

Some people who know the history of technology may point out that email, and for that matter computers themselves, were things bosses tried to keep out of work because they weren't useful and they distracted people from useful work. Today it would be quite provocative, to say the least, for a company to get rid of office workers' computers as distracting and simply pointless for office productivity. And isn't it benighted to fail to learn from history and be superstitious about, in this case, Facebook?

It's *not* superstitious. There ~~may someday be a time~~ will almost certainly be a time where Facebook is no longer such an absorbing place, and saying that office workers can productively use Facebook will be as obvious as saying that they can productively use web browsers or email. And that time is probably just a few years away. But bosses who want to limit Facebook today are not being superstitious.

Robert A. Heinlein, in *Stranger in a Strange Land* has the "man from Mars," who is at first biologically human but raised on Mars, by Martians, in the alien world of Martian culture and language, come to earth and among other things kiss girls in the most impressive way. A little later on, an inquisitive host tries to understand:

"What's so special about the way that lad kisses?"

Anne looked dreamy, then dimpled. "You should have tried it."

"I'm too old to change. But I'm interested in everything about the boy. Is this something different?"

Anne pondered it. "Yes."

"How?"

"Mike gives a kiss his whole attention."

"Oh, rats! I do myself. Or did."

Anne shook her head. "No. I've been kissed by men who did a very good job. But they don't give kissing their whole attention. They *can't*. No matter how hard they try parts of their mind are on something else. Missing the last bus—or their chances of making the gal—or maybe worry about jobs, or money, or will husband or papa or the neighbors catch on. Mike doesn't have technique . . . but when Mike kisses you he isn't doing *anything* else. You're his whole universe . . . and the moment is eternal because he doesn't have any plans and isn't going anywhere. Just kissing you." She shivered. "It's overwhelming."

Now this is part of a Messiah story, of sorts, but a Messiah story where the hero kills lightly and without guilt, and encourages people to throw off sexual shackles: in other words a Messiah story as written by a sex-crazed, anti-Christian libertine. So of course, if this insight is expressed, it may well be portrayed in erotic terms. And as an insight from alien Martian culture which has nothing to do with earth. But portraying it that way is backwards.

This alien Martian kissing insight is in fact an insight that the older generation knows, or at least knew, well. When Walkmans were first becoming popular, one friend recounted to me, his mother talked about how if you were running and had a Walkman on, you were not being attentive to your surroundings. There is a basic principle of asceticism: a principle of being attentive that used to be bedrock to American culture (and, quite obviously, Russian culture) that when you are talking with someone, or working, or at church, or practicing a hobby, the moment is eternal because you don't have any plans and you aren't going anywhere. And we have more and more ways to dodge this spiritual lesson, and have noise to keep us away from a life where eternity is in our moments. And this is not good for our spirits.

good for our spirits.

But it's also practically relevant to work; a company that tries to stamp out Facebook at work is not trying to take on the job of your spiritual director; it is trying to make ends meet. Unrestricted Facebook use doesn't just cost time; it costs momentum and energy; it costs attention; it's a way to take bright employees and have them make poorer decisions and make lower quality work.

Being able to work in an office, or jobhunt, or work at home, is an area where this spiritual discipline affects success. If the stakes are survival, then this spiritual discipline becomes a matter of survival.

34. Don't try to wag the dog. More specifically, don't try to wag God.

One of my friends has a print-out of two poems side by side:

"Invictus"

by William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

I am the captain of my soul.

"The Soul's Captain"

by Orson F. Whitney

Art thou in truth? Then what of Him
Who bought thee with His blood?
Who plunged into devouring seas
And snatched thee from the flood,

Who bore for all our fallen race
What none but Him could bear—
That God who died that man might live
And endless glory share.

Of what avail thy vaunted strength
Apart from His vast might?
Pray that His light may pierce the gloom
That thou mayest see aright.

Men are as bubbles on the wave,
As leaves upon the tree,
Thou, captain of thy soul! Forsooth,
Who gave that place to thee?

Free will is thine- free agency,
To wield for right or wrong;
But thou must answer unto Him
To whom all souls belong.

Bend to the dust that "head unbowed,"
Small part of life's great whole,
And see in Him and Him alone,
The captain of thy soul.

Trying to be "the captain on your soul" today is often more of a Oprah-style touchy-feely self-improvement project than an abrasively stiff Nietzschean campaign. But the core is unchanged and the end is the same, and it is a real temptation. It's there when we

make our plans without first seeking the Lord's guidance, and then ask God to give a rubber stamp blessing. The severity varies, but all of us do this at least a little. (I know *I* do.)

Peter Kreeft said that the chief advantage of wealth is that it does not make you happy. The statement may sound strange, but it is sensible. If you are having trouble financially, you can believe that if only you had enough money, the toughest difficulty in life would be taken care of. But if you have lots of money and you still have problems, you don't need more money; you need something more *than* money. And something like this—but dealing with much more in life than money—is at the heart of George Bernard Shaw's "There are two great tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it." The first tragedy is the tragedy of seeing ads for the Amazing New Swiffer, pining for how perfect your life would be with it, yet despite all your longing and all your best efforts, the Amazing New Swiffer forever remains beyond your grasp. The other tragedy is getting the Amazing New Swiffer, finding that it really does have the Cool Telescoping Handle the ads say it does, and then becoming painfully aware that you have the same spiritual void as you did before you owned the Amazing New Swiffer. But these two tragedies in life are not the only possibilities.

The third option is the way of the [Sermon on the Mount](#). It is the way of letting yourself be clay, shaped in the hands of the potter; it is the way of trust in providence. The dreams we imagine for our success could be incapable of making us truly happy; but the plans God provides for our growth and maturity can give us a joy we would never expect. There was an Evangelical T-shirt that shows one Christian fish symbol swimming in the opposite direction from a number of predatory fish, and says, "Go against the flow." And if it is talking about what is wrong in the world, then the message is true. But there is another sense of "going with the flow": the lifelong and difficult struggle of cooperating with the flow of God's providence. It may be paradoxical that we need to work to go with the flow, but it really is work to go with the flow, and it really is a flow, such as an Orthodox priest-monk wrote in [Christ the Eternal Tao](#): which, from

what I've heard, is like what I wrote in, [The Way of the Way](#) before becoming Orthodox—but better. [Christ the Eternal Tao](#) places the Fall in relation to the human race leaving a first tranquility and entering worry and becoming distracted with plans to arrange things our way. If we chase after our own versions of the Swiffer, whether or not we succeed, the chasing and the goal are marks of the Fall. You cannot get happiness either if you fail in your quest for the Amazing New Swiffer or if you succeed in the selfsame quest, but there is another option: to give up the quest altogether and live in something better. And that something better is Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Happiness can never come from trying to wag God. It comes from God wagging us: it comes from praying, not in order to change God, but to actively work with God changing us. Virtue is easy, much easier than vice. Getting to virtue may seem harder than remaining in vice, but this is because we do not see how hard vice is. And something funny happens along the way. If we are wise, we see our quests to be the captain of our souls as sin, nothing less, and we repent of it. And we let God work on us, slowly shaping us. Some time along the way, we think of something else we did not think to ask for: God is the Great Choreographer and we have fought his invitations to happiness by dancing the Great Dance, often without ever recognizing the invitation. And second, in his work with us, in our situations, in our prayers and other ascesis, in our successes and failures, our greatest joys and our greatest pains, he is there, working with us, mending our spiritual diseases and freeing us from internal chains that were invisible us, preparing us for freedom. And what we find, long after we realized chasing after being the captain of our souls was a silly fantasy that could never satisfy us, we realize that God is preparing us for deep spiritual freedom: beyond a freedom *in* doomed quests, a freedom *from* doomed quests, a freedom not to have one's soul chained by chasing after the Swiffer. God is the Great Physician, ever working to free us from spiritual disease and the constriction of sin; God is the great Spiritual Father arranging everything in our lives for our freedom: beyond the freedom we know to ask for, another, deeper kind of freedom that we would never even

think to ask. God ever seeks to free from chains we do not see how we can live without. And God is the giver who gives us ever better, ever wilder gifts than we ask.

It matters not how strait the gate, nor how charged with punishment the scroll: we turn to God with head ever bowed: and the Master of Our Fate shapes us to be, after him, *the captains of our souls*.

35. Never settle for ersatz sacraments.

There is something that might be called "sacramental shopping:" buying something, not really for the use you will get out of it, but to adjust things inside. This chief ersatz sacrament, and the ersatz spiritual discipline of consuming brands, are two major pillars in the ersatz religion of the ersatz god called Money. But it is not the only ersatz sacrament.

Many first world nations are working really hard to unleash the goodness of sex; and yet their birth rates are almost morbidly low compared with nations with no pretension of such a "celebration" and "unleashing." The chief good of sex is seen as a pleasurable experience. If you say that the chief good of sex is that it brings life in the world, you are seen as a bit of a sophist or a slightly self-deluded fool. These are symptoms of a real problem, the same problems that are blared loud in spam hawking a range of porn up to and including smut that makes *Penthouse* look like Botticelli. (And, as mentioned before, Viagra ads that proclaim that our natural lust, even if we lay the reins on the horse's neck, is never enough: we always need to goad ourselves more, more, more.) We are trying more and more to get the ultimate sexual thrill, and somehow it never satisfies. And where an older generation would merely call using porn (and relieving yourself) sin, and serious sin at that, we *know* it as an addiction; men are learning the hard way that addiction to porn is as joyless a chain as addiction to some narcotics. All this is tied to approaching sex chiefly as means to pleasure, and used that way it is much worse than what happens when we use eating as our constant pleasure delivery system.

This is a much nastier ersatz sacrament, partly because sexuality runs to the core of our being.

The *only* way to win this game is not to play at all...

We need *real* sacraments.

36. Live the Eucharist.

Orthodox believe in seven sacraments, but you can also say that there are a million sacraments, or only one: the Eucharist.

I am not sure what really to say about the Eucharist; perhaps one starting point might be the Holy Grail. Respected Arthurian scholar Richard Barber wrote [The Holy Grail](#) that he began his research expecting a paper-thin Christianization of originally pre-Christian pagan sources, and came to believe that the Holy Grail in medieval literature centered on the Eucharist, so much so that the so-called secrets of the Grail were in fact the so-called secrets of the Mass, an orthodox spiritual interpretation of the Mass and its various details. I am not sure I believe him all the way; I'll get to that momentarily, but this adds weight to C.S. Lewis's and Charles Williams's Arthurian commentary where they talk about the Holy Grail absorbing into itself all the Celtic pots of plenty, a Holy Grail which is significant precisely as the first fount of the Eucharist. Whatever other influences may be present in medieval Arthurian legend, it is a clumsy move to try to interpret Christianity as at most a superficial influence in the Arthurian legends and the Grail, and it really tells more about the reader than the text.

And I wanted to make an Orthodox treatment of the Holy Grail, and engage the legends. I wrote my last novella, [The Sign of the Grail](#), after reading a lot of medieval forms of Arthurian legends, and I believe there is more than meets the eye to the legends' presence in [The Sign of the Grail](#): if the narrative is dreamlike, it follows the Arthurian tellings of never-never land. And, sadly enough, part of my impetus was that I was studying in a theology program with not-very-theological theology; reading the legends almost felt like

theology compared to my coursework. But I found out something during and after my writing: I succeeded, in a way, but found that I was trying to do something that was impossible, or rather didn't make sense.

In the days that the legends of King Arthur and his court began spreading, the Western Church discouraged people from involving themselves with "idle romances;" online versions of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* are no warmer; and the Eastern Church's response is more, "the holy what?" I had to overlook a spiritual foul smell to become engrossed in the legends, and the foul smell has become a full-fledged stench over the centuries—it's not just *The da Vinci Code*. Richard Barber may be right that the Holy Grail in the medieval legends was not taken from non-Christian legends and given a Christian resurfacing. But in today's Grail questing, the Christian dimension has shrunk almost to oblivion, and been replaced by more occult forces.

In the medieval legends, the Holy Grail is something elusive: if you grasp it, it very soon slips through your fingers. You may quest for it, but it is almost by definition something beyond your reach. It has been said that if the *definition* of dinosaurs includes being extinct, then it is true on purely philosophical grounds that no dinosaurs exist: if Jurassic Park were to open up, it would still be true that no dinosaurs exist: even if enormous, ancient kinds of reptiles were right next to you, they could not be dinosaurs *by definition*, because they are not extinct. And this is very much like the quest for the Holy Grail. It is like King Pellinore in his pursuit of the ugly Questing Beast that would forever elude him. Part of the (implied) definition of the Holy Grail is that it is something you can't have.

Orthodoxy doesn't really have a tradition of questing for the Holy Grail, nor does it offer any obvious means to possess the Holy Grail. The only game in town is to *become* the Holy Grail.

The sanctification of Holy Communion is a mystery *en route* to the transformation of the faithful. Bread and wine really and truly

become the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is not consecrated to remain in the chalice; it reaches its full stature only when the vessel that receives it is no longer a lifeless cup, but a living vessel: a living person. And that reaches its full stature in transformed believers and transformed lives. The wine becomes the blood of Christ, and becomes the divine life that is lived by the body of Christ, the Church. There are icons where the chalice is present: one layer of Rublev's [icon of the Trinity](#) is the Father and the Spirit on either side in the Heavenly reality reflected in earthly chalices. The chalice is easier to see in [an icon of Christ, the bread of life](#). But in these layers, not only is every chalice mystically the first chalice: we are made to be more truly the Holy Grail than the Holy Grail itself. We are to receive the Eucharist, and live it in our lives.

There was a Russian saint who authorized more frequent participation in Communion when hard times were descending on Russia. I am wary of treating why some devout Orthodox receive Communion almost every week, and others only on the highest of feasts, but whether Communion is frequent or not, it is a powerful aid for hard times.

37. Hope for God to be a cruel man, harvesting where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered (see [Matthew 25:24](#)).

There is a Chinese saying associated with Taoism: "Heaven's greatest mercy is without mercy." And there are senses in which Orthodox would not say this: Orthodoxy decisively rejected Novatianism, which is an Orthodoxy without the principle of oikonomia. Both oikonomia, the principle of mercifully relaxing strictness, and akgravia, the principle of striving for strict excellence, are of profound importance. But there is another way in which God's greatest mercy is without mercy. All of us have the spiritual disease called sin, and God the Great Physician will never stop until he has uprooted all of it. Sin is a spiritual cancer, and as long as we live on earth, we need to repent. And the Great Physician will not stop so long as there is one tiny tumor hidden in our smallest toe. In that way, the Great Physician who is also the Great Choreographer arranging for our good in hard times and easy is merciless: he is a

cruel man, altogether without mercy. I've been through chemotherapy; it could perhaps have been worse, but it was one of the nastier things I've been through. But, in my chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the doctors and nurses weren't aiming to give me an enjoyable experience; they were aiming to give me my *life*, and I am profoundly grateful to them for this. Sometimes God's work with us is very pleasant. He wants to give us every good, and even his calls to repentance are meant to give us a host of good things, joy included. But all of us have the seeds of Hell inside us, and all of us need unconditional surrender to the Great Physician. And to those of us who hold on to sin because in our warped state we think it adorns us, God's greatest mercy is without mercy.

How then does God harvest where he has not sown? The Nicene Creed's opening words announce, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." The first chapters of [Genesis](#) proclaim that the world is God's creation. God has created everything outside himself: the very demons owe their existence to God as much as the angels do. Every fish, rock and tree; every good or bad person, every angel and demon, time itself—all these are sown by the Great Sower. Then what is there to harvest that God hath not sown?

The answer is that God has not sown evil, nor sin, nor death. And he harvests where he has not sown. The Devil killed Christ in the hour that darkness reigned, but this was the beginning of the three-day Pascha of Christ's resurrection, where Christ crushed death, the Firstborn of the Dead ([Colossians 1:18](#)), who opened the doors of death so that all might enter: the moment Satan seemed to secure certain victory was only the final sacrifice by which God secured checkmate. God did not sow the death of his Son, but he harvested where he had not sown: God harvested from the death of his Son the resurrection of his sons, the saints, his whole Church. And the same is true in the saints' lives. The gulag where [Fr. Arseny](#) served was nothing other than the work of the Devil. God did not sow this, but he worked in it, and he harvested from it a saint's life that touched others. God did not sow those evils, but he worked in them. As "The

reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" ([1 John 3:8](#)), but not by turning back the clock and simply erasing them, but by moving forward and transforming them. And the story of [Fr. Arseny](#) is the story of God's triumph in and through his people, triumph even in a death camp. Have you ever met a recovering alcoholic who has been dry for years, and who shows a singular warmth and caring for others? Some of the most beautiful people I know have been recovering alcoholics, and God has harvested where he has not sown and destroyed the Devil's work. And the same is true of our sins and the problems in our lives: God will, if we let him, transform them and harvest where he has never sown.

We live in a time of unusual fragmentation; the postmodern age is more of a bazaar than much that went before, but one and the same God who harvests where he has never sown also gathers where he has not scattered, and gathers into himself. We were all made for communion with God, but sin has scattered us much farther than our expulsion of Paradise. But God is stronger. Even if he has not scattered, he wills to gather all to himself.

Must we allow God to be cruel? We do not have the authority to veto God on this. Some have complained about "The God I believe in would never [*fill in the blank*]," but the God we believe in surprises us and catches us off guard. If we correct God on how he may love, this is a problem, and sticking our head in the sand does not make hard times genuinely easier. Better open ourselves to the infinite mercy of a God who is cruel, harvests where he has never sown, and gathers where he has never scattered.

Fighting this will never help us, and certainly not help us survive hard times.

38. Pray all the time.

The *Philokalia* say a lot about the Jesus Prayer, and [The Way of the Pilgrim](#) tells not only of the life and survival of a homeless man amidst many dangers, but of God truly blessing him. Much of his

book is about him living the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

39. Read the saints' lives.

I didn't really know what I missed until I started reading the saints' lives. Difficult lives are not the exception in the saints' lives: they are the rule. Yet the deepest thing one encounters is not this, but God's triumph in his saints.

[The Orthodox Church in America page for saints' lives](#) links to different saints each day, and it is an excellent place to read something each day. ([The Natural Cycle Clock](#) includes related links for the so-called Old Calendar.) Either of these can be bookmarked and revisited for a daily portion of spiritual nourishment.

40. Work hard.

There are different kinds of work in life: work that earns money, work at home, and spiritual work among others. We often pray for God to make life easier for us, when we should pray, "God, give me mountains to climb and the strength for climbing." Every kind of work has merit, and wisdom literature tells us ([Proverbs 6:6-11](#)),

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her food in summer, and gathers her sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond, and want like an armed man.

A lot of work we need to do is work without any chief, officer, or ruler: job hunting, for instance. The word "wisdom" in the Bible does not conjure up the image of a seer with deep, piercing insights; we would do well to read it as "skill for living" if nothing else.

[Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#) makes an interesting

point in its introduction. When the author looked through wisdom literature from different ages, he noticed a recent trend. All of the wisdom literature aimed for skill for living, but the most recent wisdom literature offered what he called a "personality ethic" that sought success in superficial tricks and techniques. Almost all of the other wisdom literature recognized a "character ethic" that said true success in life is a matter of character and virtue that reaches to the core of our being. "Get rich quick" has been called "the perennial cry of the lazy man," and lots of ads on the web promise a secret that will provide lots of steady income but require little time or work. And the best response is like the wisdom books: "Consider the ant, lazybones. How long will you fall for these scams? Get off your duff, roll up your sleeves, get to work, and keep working!"

41. Go beyond work.

It is true, not only that virtue is easier than vice, but that the Christian life is a life of grace, a Sabbath rest in God: "Be still, and know that I am God" ([Psalm 46:10 KJV](#)). Someone said, "I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." The rest on this side of hard work is only laziness, but the rest on the other side of work is Heaven, and it begins in this life.

42. Go beyond nice, but don't settle for mean.

Being nice is not enough. We in America work hard at being nice, at making other people feel good and at trying to avoid hurting other people's feelings.

But do not confuse being nice with Christian love. Love, like a person, has soft flesh and a hard spine. How a person feels now is not the only concern to love: a much bigger concern is giving what you can to the other person's growth for a lifetime. George MacDonald said that love is easy to please but difficult to satisfy, which is a much greater gift than nice. Life is hard, and people can have trouble believing both that God is in charge and that he is good when really hard things happen. But God is *both* in charge *and* good.

The problem is that we have confused being nice with being good. We ask what is wrong with God when he fails to be nice, and the answer is that God has never been merely nice. He works for our good on a deeper level, concerned with discipleship and growth and doing better things for us than simply be nice and give us what ask when we try to inform him what will make us happy.

Our hard work to be a nice world may or may not last. I would not assume that nice is permanent any more than a booming economy is permanent, and some have suggested that nice will come to be replaced by mean. But as for us, we don't need to be merely nice, let alone merely mean. We need a concern for others' growth as people, and we need love with soft flesh and a hard spine.

43. Pay attention to the wallflowers in life.

One theologian, speaking in a chapel, told how when he was younger his mother told him, to pay attention to the wallflowers at a dance, not the eye-catchers dancing in the center of the room. The wallflowers were ultimately much more interesting, his mother told him. And, he said, she was right, and the lesson wasn't just about dancing. When they are considering what doctrines to explore the most, he suggested that we look at the wallflower doctrines.

This is not just a truth about dancing and theology either. Good software developers may use buzzwords on as as-needed basis when dealing with people who expect them, but in the best software developers' favorite professional conversations, the discussion is all about professional wallflowers that the best computer science has been discussing for years, if not decades. It is a *faux pas* to use a string of buzzwords, much like trying to show off your vocabulary by constantly dropping the F-bomb.

"Local" is one of the eye-catchers, and there may be something to it; there is a good case that our ability to make our own private worlds with likeminded friends from the internet loses something that was part of life when life was local because there was scarcely an alternative. "Green" is far from being a wallflower, and there's

something to it. But turning off the lights (like reducing and reusing) was once part of the old-fashioned virtue of thrift before it was rediscovered as being green, and for that matter Christians spoke of stewardship before being green was such a watchword. Ages before that, Christian theologians spoke of the tie between humans and nature, looking on the natural world with respect. But the point is not just that local and green have taken a few moves from the wallflowers. The eye-catchers are not as interesting as the wallflowers.

There are other wallflowers in life, and they are also interesting.

44. Don't assume that because Church Fathers could not imagine the world we live in that their words are irrelevant.

The wisdom of the Fathers may be all the more relevant. It is true that we have been able to cast off much of thrift like a shackle, but the words of the Fathers on thrift were not just because of economic conditions unlike ours; they are written because thrift is good for us as humans. The Fathers could not imagine porn as it comes to us, but what is obsolete about the words of [Proverbs](#) on lust is all on the surface: if [Proverbs](#) tells us that lust is toxic, these words lose nothing today. (Ask a recovering porn addict.) If our technologies and our culture give us more ways to indulge narcissism, the words of the Fathers on pride are far from obsolete. Old warnings about addiction to too much alcohol are *more* relevant, not *less*, when drinking too much alcohol serves as a gateway to meth and cocaine. And this is just some of what the Fathers say about sins; what they say about goodness is even deeper.

The Fathers represent advice that transcend their historical situation to speak to other times and ages. Possibly some of the details need to be adapted, but this is really a side issue. The Holy Spirit moves in the Fathers, they speak to human life, and they have much to teach us.

Some postmodern scholarship that I've read makes a critique of the philosophies that immediately preceded postmodernism, and then assumes "without loss of generality" as mathematicians say

then assumes, without loss of generality – as mathematicians say, that nothing more needs to be said about anything else people have said in the ages before. It does help keep articles to a manageable length if postmodern philosophy is compared only to one other philosophy. But more is going on. There is a real temptation to compare a new trend only with what came right before it, and not consider that much older trends may have a better alternative. This is a loss; we need wisdom that has been accumulating for ages.

45. Store up treasures in Heaven.

The [Sermon on the Mount](#) speak to us today:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

If danger is looming, we may conceive of a practical response in terms of laying up treasures: gold, which can be stolen, or stocks, which can crash, or money itself, which can fall prey to inflation. But we shouldn't be reaching for treasures in earth: we need treasures in Heaven: golden virtues that can strengthen us for hard times, community that can pull together, and kindnesses that may be responded to when we least expect it. And even this much is a materialist view of treasures in Heaven: storing up treasures in Heaven teaches us to work with the divine providence that we need most in disasters. It puts first things first:

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

These words are tied, if subtly, to their context: storing up treasures in Heaven gives us a sound eye, while merely storing up treasures on earth stores up blindness, the blindness of being penny wise and pound foolish. The last thing we need in a rough situation is

for the light in us to be darkness; it is in disasters we need a sound eye more than any other time, and trying to solve our problems by storing up treasures on earth is simply not up to the task before us.

The [Sermon on the Mount](#) continues after this:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

Virtues are one kind of treasure in Heaven, and they are powerful in themselves: one Greek word, *arete*, means both virtue and excellence. But this last passage from the [Sermon on the Mount](#) says more. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) does not *need* to say, as I have, that virtues and other treasures in Heaven can do things on earth.

The major point is that God looks out for us in his divine providence, and we are better building our lives on this providence than trying to do everything ourselves. We are better off living the lifelong lesson of trusting in God than trying to get enough money to replace the providence we do not trust God for.

It is a mistake to say, "Yes, but we do not live in a perfect world and I need something more practical." The [Sermon on the Mount](#) is concerned with practical realities in practical life. When it says, to paraphrase, "Don't make yourself bear tomorrow's stress today; each day has enough stress of its own," it is not telling us that it would be nice to have our lives be stress-free. It's telling wise advice for people whose lives are not stress free, and the more stress you are under, the more practical the advice becomes. Having problems in your life but being too practical for the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is like having a computer program that you can't get to work, but being too smart to read the manual or try to Google a solution on the web. It's a very *impractical* way to be practical.

46. "Stand back, and take off the shoes from your feet, because the place where you are standing is holy ground!" ([Exodus 3:5](#))

Take off the shoes from your feet. In ancient times, shoes were dead things, made not from synthetic materials but from the leathery dead skin of animals. And these words first spoken to Moses still speak today. If we encounter God, we must spiritually take off dead shoes from our feet: if we are to meet God, it will cost us our dead preconceptions and the dead idols that are a dead weight to us. These words come in Moses's great encounter with God in [Exodus 3:13-15](#), and when Moses draws near he is told to shed his dead shoes on sacred ground.

Today's New Age works very hard to dislodge dead preconceptions. What better way to strip off dead preconceptions than to celebrate any and all religions? To pick a popular topic—an eye-catcher these days—the Mayan "astrological" calendar is a cultural work of beauty; one of the core insights is that each day has an appointed purpose, and Mayan practitioners meet their spiritual

leaders to work out how to best live the day as is fitting to its place in the cycles of their calendar. Orthodoxy has something like this: there is a liturgical rhythm which its people are to live out, and what I first read about the Mayan calendar in anthropology helped me to start living a real asset in Orthodoxy. Orthodox, among others, distinguish chronos from kairos:

There are two [Greek] words [chronos and kairos] that are both translated time, but their meanings are very different. Translating them both as time is like translating both genuine concern and hypocritical flattery as "politeness" because you are translating into a language that doesn't show the distinction.

as I wrote in [The Horn of Joy](#). Kairos is appointed time, time where moments are there with a purpose, time such as liturgical time highlights with its rhythms of seasons and days and the varying ways they are lived out. Chronos is time without this meaning, time such as a clock can measure, and in the words of one Orthodox homily, the time of "one damn thing after another." We have largely fallen into chronos and largely forgotten kairos even if we still yearn for what we miss, and the Mayan calendar did and does understand kairos extremely well. But something more (or, rather, less) appears to be going on in the sudden interest in the Mayan calendar.

This something ~~more~~ less has to do with how New Age fails to really remove dead shoes from our feet. New Age is like waterskiing: one moves along quickly, skimming along the top very quickly, where really removing dead shoes from our feet is like swimming: you fall in the water and stay in. What may be going on in the sudden interest in Mayan time is, as I wrote in [Technonomicon](#),

There was great excitement in the past millenium when, it was believed, the Age of Pisces would draw to a close, and the Age of Aquarius would begin, and this New Age would be an exciting dawn when all we find dreary about the here and now would melt away. Then the Age of Aquarius started, at least officially, but the New Age failed to rescue us from finding the here and now to be dreary. Then there was great excitement as

something like 97% of children born after a certain date were born indigo children: children whose auras are indigo rather than a more mundane color. But, unfortunately, this celebrated watershed did not stop the here and now from being miserable. Now there is great hope that in 2012, according to the Mayan "astrological" calendar, another momentous event will take place, perhaps finally delivering us from the here and now. And, presumably, when December 21, 2012 fails to satisfy us, subsequent momentous events will promise to deliver us from a here and now we find unbearable.

The quotes are because the anthropology I've read talks about the Mayan calendar without making any connection to astrology, even if they find it beautiful and deep. I have run into New Age hope for a Mayan 2012 watershed, but it never discusses things like, "The Quiché [Mayan calendar-based] reality causes them to scrutinize each day and its character as it relates to their own character, their desires, and their past, as well as the tasks that lie ahead," as *The Dance of Life* tries to explain the beauty and wisdom. *The Dance of Life* is written to challenge one's dead preconceptions; that it does so in an occult way is not the point. No New Age hubbub about December 21, 2012 seems to really challenge the dead shoes we need to be freed from—certainly not the dead shoe of trying to escape a miserable here and now, an idol diametrically opposed to the spiritual beauty not only of the Mayan calendar, but of the Christian calendar too. Whether the Mayan calendar should be understood as "astrological" I am not sure; certainly *The Dance of Life* with its occult bent never connects the Mayan calendar with astrology. But to ask the Mayan calendar to deliver an escape from the miserable here and now is to ask it to work against its fundamental beauty and its fundamental principle: the point of the Mayan calendar, like the Orthodox Christian one, is not to provide *escape* from the here and now but further provide us help to *engage* the here and now. However much New Age may offer to open our minds, what it gives here at least is further help nailing the dead shoes to our feet.

All of us stand on holy ground. The whole world is created by God, and to God it returns. Can we escape? *Never!* [Psalm 139 KJV](#)

reads,

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:
If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me.
If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me;
Even the night shall be light about me.
Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee;
But the night shineth as the day:
The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

The whole world is an emblem of God's glory: God's plan to share his glory with the human race is ultimately the glorification of the entire Creation, and God wills to engage us in the situations we are in. And his glory will ever shock us to remove our dead shoes and enter life more abundantly. There is no place we can flee from God, nor any place that is not holy ground where God will tell us we have dead leather shoes to remove. And taking off our dead leather shoes is lifegiving.

47. Take a cue from an older kind of fermented drink.

[Nourishing Traditions](#), which calls for a return to less plastic-y industrial foods such as was eaten in nutritional golden ages, has a curious inconsistency. She grinds an axe against what you could buy at a liquor store: her nutritional golden ages include colonial America, but in the "traditional" recipe for punch she censors rum and even substitutes something else to make up the five ingredients for an alcohol-free punch. Not that she is a teetotaler: she advocates another kind of rather different alcoholic beverages that are made by another process, "lacto-fermented" beverages made by a process that isn't found in today's commercially prepared beer, wine, and liquors. But, none the less, she grinds quite an axe against drinks that are

commercially available. She offers no convincing, or even unconvincing, explanation for how negatively she treats modern drinks as used in her nutritional golden ages.

When I spoke with a friend who was a big advocate of the [Nourishing Traditions](#)-style movement, she openly acknowledged that this was an inconsistency and made no blanket condemnation of the modern drinks a liquor store sells (I think she said she enjoys a glass of wine now and then), but she did say something that [Nourishing Traditions](#) could have said but didn't. The older kind of drinks, home-made fruit of lacto-fermentation rather than yeast fermentation, satisfy in a way that yeast-fermented commercial drinks don't. And there's something to that. When I brought a jar of lacto-fermented water kefir to church for a special occasion, the remark I got, completely unsolicited, said it was satisfying.

I remember when I was in France, hearing some of the history of Champagne and how it came to be. Early on was discussion about how they raised the alcohol content; today's wine is 12-13% alcohol, but in the ancient world wine was around 4% alcohol. And I'm not sure I've ever had a lacto-fermented drink above 2% alcohol, but there is a difference. However much I may love a good wine, I have to be disciplined because if it tastes good, I could drink a drop more than is good for me if I don't pay close attention to how much. But the difference with a good home-made lacto-fermented drink is that the temptation to drink and drink is much less. It's not just that it would take much more of it to get drunk; even if you like it you don't want to keep on drinking because you are satisfied the way you are after a good meal.

This is of course dwarfed by the real motivation for lacto-fermented drinks, namely that they are believed to offer much better nourishment, (*probiotic* and all that), but I mention this because this is a microcosm of pervasive changes that have taken place and are taking place throughout the world we live in, and affecting all our life. If I may make a table of what this is a microcosm of, with one column for each vastly different fermented drink:

Yeast-fermented modern Lacto-fermented ancient wine drinks

At least a little buzz. Satisfaction.

Unwinding to technology like Unwinding to friends' conversation television and radio. or music played by your friends.

New Age exotic tripping through Orthodoxy's sublime and (attempts at) various traditions sublimated way of giving the and their practices. exotic.

The thrill of new narcissism. The joy of humility.

Postmodern pursuit of Growing roots, in beliefs and in philosophical adventure. life.

Cycling through new, short-lived Owing things built to last and possessions. intended to be kept.

Seeking good nutrition and Making Splenda your tool to lose eating to nourish the body. weight.

Going on a crusade to solve the world's problems. "Just" being a member of society and penitently turning the crusade against your own sins.

Having friendships that are Having friendships that last for beyond disposable: years unless something goes transactional seriously wrong.

Trying to make friendship with people you choose. Learning to make friendship with people who are in your life that you cannot choose.

Porn and related pleasures. Marriage and children.

We seem to be shifting further left, and this is not a good thing.

48. Prepare for losses.

Christ told St. Peter, [John 21:18 RSV](#),

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.

These words may be given to all of us.

The Christian Way is a Way of being emptied; its triumph is a triumph precisely *in* loss, a way of life resurrected from death.

The Way before us may be, as for St. Peter, "you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." We may have enough to forgive now, but we may have much more to forgive in the future. If that is the case, the best preparation in the future is to work on forgiveness now, even if you make a mess of it as I do. Forgiveness is a way of emptying, a letting go that is connected to the Man who said from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do" ([Luke 23:34](#)). And this forgiveness is key to opening us up to receive forgiveness: of all the points in the Our Father given as a model prayer, forgiveness alone is singled out for further comment ([Matthew 6:14-15 RSV](#)):

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Unforgiveness, trying to hold on to what we think is our due, locks us out of God's work to give us a greater good than we are wise enough to look for. But if we surrender to God in forgiveness, emptying ourselves, our emptying is in continuity with the emptying of Christ, who again ([Philippians 2:5-11 RSV](#)):

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This Way of forgiveness, this emptying, is the Way, the Truth, and the Life who is Christ Jesus himself who gives triumph where we

and the one who is Christ Jesus himself who gives triumph where we can anticipate only defeat. Christ's words to St. Peter announce a martyr's triumph, and Tradition holds that St. Peter was sentenced to be crucified, and said that he was unworthy to be crucified as his Lord was crucified, and asked to be crucified upside down: inverted crucifixion being the one form of crucifixion more excruciatingly painful than Christ's kind of crucifixion. But this is triumph, eternal triumph, a triumph in St. Peter's humbly emptying himself. And if we are emptied, if we forgive, Christ will triumph in us. And this may be the kind of triumph that God works in and through us.

49. Light one candle: it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Some have said that a candle, such as Orthodox use in prayer, is an emblem of Christ: it gives light, and it gives light by emptying himself. Not everyone uses that image, but God is light, and Christ shone with the uncreated light as he was transfigured. The halo of light around the head of a saint on an icon is not just convention: it is there because Christ blazed with glory so that his face shone like the sun. And this same glory manifests, to some degree, in his saints. One saint, at the end of a holy life, lay on his deathbed with his face shining with the light of Christ, and said, "I have not even begun to repent." This is a microcosm of God's emptying victory.

Light a candle. Or *be* a candle.

50. "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

All else is commentary.

All of what I have said above has real imperfections and leaves enormous gaps. But I would like to address one question: Have I said I was going to offer guidance for rough situations and pulled a bait and switch, offering spirituality instead? To answer that, I recall one friend in high school who said with some disgust that he wished C.S. Lewis had left his religion out of [The Chronicles of Narnia](#). I kept my mouth shut, but the suggestion struck me as strange, even clueless, like saying you wished

Newton had kept all math out of his physics. To dislike Newtonian physics may be one thing, but it betrays some confusion to say that you like Newtonian physics but treat the math as an intrusion, as if the math had been artificially inserted like zombies and ultra-violence into [Pride and Prejudice](#). C.S. Lewis was a man fascinated by myths and legends even before he became a Christian. Tolkein and others showed him his inconsistency in praising a pagan myth of a dying and rising god and then turning his nose up at Christianity as utterly trite; C.S. Lewis became a Christian precisely because he came to believe that the myths he loved all came together in Christ. Lewis crafted [The Chronicles of Narnia](#) out of love for all of these stories, and it is, to put it politely, a somewhat surprising suggestion to say that the story Lewis found truest and most beautiful simply does not belong in [The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe](#). And perhaps it is a bit of a surprising suggestion to say "Tell me what you can about surviving in a disaster, but recognize that your religion is irrelevant to this question."

Robert Heinlein, in [Stranger in a Strange Land](#), wrote, when the characters faced a rather daunting emergency,

"...But I took other steps the first night you were here. You know your Bible?"

"Uh, not very well."

"It merits study, it contains practical advice for most emergencies..."

And this in a distinctly anti-Christian book. Perhaps the text goes on to a rather secular application of [John](#), but the Bible is, among other things, God's own manual for how to deal with rough situations. (And this is to say nothing of the Orthodox Church.)

Saints Cheering Us On

The famous Hall of Fame ([Hebrews 11:4-40 RSV](#)) tells,

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the first-born might not touch them. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land; but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies. And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets -- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were

killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated -- of whom the world was not worthy -- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The image is of a stadium where athletes have run the full race, have received their crowns of victory, and now stand around cheering those who are still running: the faithful who are still in life's struggles.

This is not just the prophets and righteous saints from the Old Testament cheering on the first Christians; it is also the saints from the ages cheering on Christians today. If in America we have a revolution, and it turns out horribly, we will enter it with the prayers of the host of Russian saints. In the worst case, it will be an extremely difficult struggle, but there are others who have struggled before us and will stand, crowned in victory, cheering us on to join them in victory.

The text continues to call these saints, "a great cloud of witnesses." We do not know, for sure, what will happen, but whether we have a recovery or a maelstrom, the whole world, including the United States, will have the prayers of this great cloud of witnesses, including the vast army of Russian saints from ancient and modern times.

We have prayers, *from Russia with love.*

God the Spiritual Father

I believe in one God, the Father, Almighty...

The Nicene Creed

All of us do the will of God. The question is not whether we do God's will or not, but whether we do God's will as *instruments*, as Satan and Judas did, or as *sons*, as Peter and John did. In the end Satan may be nothing more than a hammer in the hand of God.

C.S. Lewis, paraphrased

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

[Proverbs](#)

My precious, precious child, I love you and will never leave you. When you see one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

[Footprints](#), paraphrased

Look to every situation as if you were going to bargain at the market, always looking to make a spiritual profit.

The Philokalia, paraphrased

For it was fitting that God, for whom and by whom all things

exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make Christ the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Hebrews

There are a lot of concerns on people's minds. For those of us in the U.S., we've been facing an economic disaster. Is "the decade from Hell" over and done? Or has the economic depression just begun? Has the *real* nightmare just *begun*? People have faced unemployment, and some are worried about hyper-inflation. And the big question on almost everyone's mind is, "Can I survive this? And if so, how?" And these quotes have something to say to the billion dollar question on almost everyone's mind.

Let's turn the clock back a bit, to 1755. There was a catastrophic earthquake in Lisbon in Portugal, and its untold misery shook people's faith in the goodness of the world we live in. In the questioning that came afterwards, Voltaire wrote *Candide* in which the rather ludicrous teacher Pangloss is always explaining that we live in "the best of all possible worlds:" no matter what misfortune or disaster befell them, the unshakable Pangloss would always find a way to explain that we still lived in the best of all possible worlds. And Voltaire's point is to rip that preposterous idea apart, giving a dose of reality and showing what the misery in Lisbon made painfully clear: we do *not* live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But there is another shoe to drop.

We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods, and it is a more profound truth, a more vibrant truth, a truth that goes much deeper into the heart of root of all things to say that we may not live in the best of all possible worlds, but *we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods*.

Once we have truly grasped that God the Spiritual Father is the best of all possible Gods, it becomes a mistake to focus on how, in fact, we simply do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Perhaps we all need to repent and recognize that we ourselves are far from being the best of all possible *people*. But we need to raise our eyes higher: raise our eyes

and see that our lives and our world are under the love of the best of all possible Gods: God the Spiritual Father.

The Orthodox Church has understood this since ancient times. Let's read some longer quotes:

We ought all of us always to thank God for both the universal and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvelous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The particular gifts consist of all that God has given to each individual. These include:

- Wealth, so that one can perform acts of charity.
- Poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude.
- Authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgment and establish virtue.
- Obedience and service, so that one can more readily attain salvation of soul.
- Health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God.
- Sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience.
- Spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue.
- Weakness and ignorance, so that, turning one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility.
- Unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may even be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving

alms.

- Ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain the virtues and thus become dispassionate and fit to save other souls.
- Trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection.

All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused, they are not good, but are harmful for both soul and body.

The Philokalia

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to.

Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The Philokalia

All These Things Were From Me

(The new St. Seraphim, of Viritsa was born in 1866. He married and had three children. In 1920, at the age of 54, he and his wife quietly separated and each entered monastic life. Eventually he became the spiritual father of the St. Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg, where, as a clairvoyant staretz, he also confessed thousands of laity. He said, "I am the storage room where people's afflictions gather." In imitation of his patron saint, he prayed for a

thousand nights on a rock before an icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov. He reposed in the Lord in 1949 and the Church of Russia glorified him in August of 2000.)

The following is (slightly abridged) from a letter sent by St. Seraphim to a spiritual child of his, a hierarch who was at that time in a Soviet prison. It is in the form of consolation given by God to a troubled man's soul.

St. Seraphim of Viritsa

Have you ever thought that everything that concerns you, concerns Me, also? You are precious in my eyes and I love you; for his reason, it is a special joy for Me to train you. When temptations and the opponent [the Evil One] come upon you like a river, I want you to know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that your weakness has need of My strength, and your safety lies in allowing Me to protect you. I want you to know that when you are in difficult conditions, among people who do not understand you, and cast you away, This was from Me.

I am your God, the circumstances of your life are in My hands; you did not end up in your position by chance; this is precisely the position I have appointed for you. Weren't you asking Me to teach you humility? And there - I placed you precisely in the "school" where they teach this lesson. Your environment, and those who are around you, are performing My will. Do you have financial difficulties and can just barely survive? Know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that I dispose of your money, so take refuge in Me and depend upon Me. I want you to know that My storehouses are inexhaustible, and I am faithful in My promises. Let it never happen that they tell you in your need, "Do not believe in your Lord and God." Have you ever spent the night in suffering? Are you separated from your relatives, from those you love? I allowed this that you would turn to Me, and in Me find consolation and comfort. Did your friend or someone to whom you opened your heart, deceive you? This was from Me.

you? THIS WAS FROM ME.

I allowed this frustration to touch you so that you would learn that your best friend is the Lord. I want you to bring everything to Me and tell Me everything. Did someone slander you? Leave it to Me; be attached to Me so that you can hide from the "contradiction of the nations." I will make your righteousness shine like light and your life like midday noon. Your plans were destroyed? Your soul yielded and you are exhausted? This was from Me.

You made plans and have your own goals; you brought them to Me to bless them. But I want you to leave it all to Me, to direct and guide the circumstances of your life by My hand, because you are the orphan, not the protagonist. Unexpected failures found you and despair overcame your heart, but know That this was from Me.

With tiredness and anxiety I am testing how strong your faith is in My promises and your boldness in prayer for your relatives. Why is it not you who entrusted their cares to My providential love? You must leave them to the protection of My All Pure Mother. Serious illness found you, which may be healed or may be incurable, and has nailed you to your bed. This was from Me.

Because I want you to know Me more deeply, through physical ailment, do not murmur against this trial I have sent you. And do not try to understand My plans for the salvation of people's souls, but uncomplainingly and humbly bow your head before My goodness. You were dreaming about doing something special for Me and, instead of doing it, you fell into a bed of pain. This was from Me.

Because then you were sunk in your own works and plans and I wouldn't have been able to draw your thoughts to Me. But I want to teach you the most deep thoughts and My lessons, so that you may serve Me. I want to teach you that you are nothing without Me. Some of my best children are those who, cut off from an active life, learn to use the weapon of ceaseless prayer. You were called unexpectedly to undertake a difficult and responsible position, supported by Me. I have given you these difficulties and as the Lord God I will bless all your works, in all your paths. In everything I, your Lord, will be your

guide and teacher. Remember always that every difficulty you come across, every offensive word, every slander and criticism, every obstacle to your works, which could cause frustration and disappointment, This is from Me.

Know and remember always, no matter where you are, That whatsoever hurts will be dulled as soon as you learn In all things, to look at Me. Everything has been sent to you by Me, for the perfection of your soul.

All these things were from Me.

St. Seraphim of Viritsa

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes

for us with signs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[Romans](#)

We may be entering an economic depression. We live in hard times, and things may get much harder. It is becoming more and more clear that this is no mere recession: it looks more and more like a depression. We see people asking, "Where is God when it hurts?" And there is something important about the answer to "Where is God when it hurts?": something very important, something profoundly important.

I believe in one God, the *Spiritual* Father Almighty.

I'm not sure how to explain this without saying something about Orthodox monasticism, but the Orthodox concept of a *spiritual father* is

of someone one owes obedience in everything, and who normally assigns some things that are very difficult to do, unpleasant, and painful. And this seems a strange thing to be getting into. But there is method to what may seem mad: we do not reach our greatest good, we do not flourish, we do not reach our highest heights, if we are the spiritual equivalent of spoiled children. And the entire point of this duty of obedience is to arrange things for the good of the person who obeys in this situation. *The entire point of obedience in what the spiritual father arranges is for the spiritual father as a spiritual physician to give health and freedom through the disciple's obedience.*

In that sense, only monks and nuns are expected to have spiritual fathers to shape them. The rest of us have God as our Spiritual Father, and we can kick against the goads, but God the Spiritual Father is at work in every person we meet. *God the Spiritual Father is God the Great Physician, working everything for our health and freedom if we will cooperate.* People and situations he sends us may be part of his will for us as instruments, or they may be part of his will for us as sons of God, but God's will unfolds in each person who acts in our lives: kind people and cruel, having excess and having lack, getting our way and having our will cut short as a spiritual father does to form a monk under his care, becomes part of the work of God the Spiritual Father. Even economic nightmares become part of "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

When God gives us our true good, *nothing* can take it away.

What exactly is our true good unfolds in [the saints' lives, which are well worth reading](#): many of them lived in great hardship. Some were martyred; [the beloved St. Nectarios](#) lost his job repeatedly for reasons that were not just unfortunate, but completely and absolutely unfair. God was still at work in his life, and he is now crowned as a saint in Heaven. God allowed things to happen, terrible things to happen, but not one of them took him away from God giving him everything he needed and ultimately working in him the glory of one of the greatest saints in recent times.

[The Sermon on the Mount](#) says some harsh words about how we use

money, but these words set the stage for a profound treasure that we can still have, even in an economic depression:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, [*or, today, where economic havoc can ruin our financial planning*] but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal [*or, today, where your treasures cannot be taken away even by a complete economic meltdown*].

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

For the godless seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own

AS OWN WORRIES. EACH DAY HAS ENOUGH TROUBLE OF ITS OWN.

The life of St. Philaret the Merciful speaks volumes:

Righteous Philaret the Merciful, son of George and Anna, was raised in piety and the fear of God. He lived during the eighth century in the village of Amneia in the Paphlagonian district of Asia Minor. His wife, Theoseba, was from a rich and illustrious family, and they had three children: a son John, and daughters Hypatia and Evanthia.

Philaret was a rich and illustrious dignitary, but he did not hoard his wealth. Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about "these least ones" (Mt. 25:40); the the Apostle Paul's reminder that we will take nothing with us from this world (1 Tim 6:7); and the assertion of King David that the righteous would not be forsaken (Ps 36/37:25). Philaret, whose name means "lover of virtue," was famed for his love for the poor.

One day Ishmaelites [Arabs] attacked Paphlagonia, devastating the land and plundering the estate of Philaret. There remained only two oxen, a donkey, a cow with her calf, some beehives, and the house. But he also shared them with the poor. His wife reproached him for being heartless and unconcerned for his own family. Mildly, yet firmly he endured the reproaches of his wife and the jeers of his children. "I have hidden away riches and treasure," he told his family, "so much that it would be enough for you to feed and clothe yourselves, even if you lived a hundred years without working."

The saint's gifts always brought good to the recipient. Whoever received anything from him found that the gift would multiply, and that person would become rich. Knowing this, a certain man came to St Philaret asking for a calf so that he could start a herd. The cow missed its calf and began to bellow. Theoseba said to her husband, "You have no pity on us, you merciless man, but don't you feel sorry for the cow? You have separated her from her calf." The saint praised his wife, and agreed that it was not right to separate the cow and the calf. Therefore, he called the poor man to whom he had given the calf

and told him to take the cow as well.

That year there was a famine, so St Philaret took the donkey and went to borrow six bushels of wheat from a friend of his. When he returned home, a poor man asked him for a little wheat, so he told his wife to give the man a bushel. Theoseba said, "First you must give a bushel to each of us in the family, then you can give away the rest as you choose." Philaretos then gave the man two bushels of wheat. Theoseba said sarcastically, "Give him half the load so you can share it." The saint measured out a third bushel and gave it to the man. Then Theoseba said, "Why don't you give him the bag, too, so he can carry it?" He gave him the bag. The exasperated wife said, "Just to spite me, why not give him all the wheat." St Philaret did so.

Now the man was unable to lift the six bushels of wheat, so Theoseba told her husband to give him the donkey so he could carry the wheat home. Blessing his wife, Philaret gave the donkey to the man, who went home rejoicing. Theoseba and the children wept because they were hungry.

The Lord rewarded Philaret for his generosity: when the last measure of wheat was given away, a old friend sent him forty bushels. Theoseba kept most of the wheat for herself and the children, and the saint gave away his share to the poor and had nothing left. When his wife and children were eating, he would go to them and they gave him some food. Theoseba grumbled saying, "How long are you going to keep that treasure of yours hidden? Take it out so we can buy food with it."

During this time the Byzantine empress Irene (797-802) was seeking a bride for her son, the future emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos (780-797). Therefore, emissaries were sent throughout all the Empire to find a suitable girl, and the envoys came to Amneia.

When Philaret and Theoseba learned that these most illustrious guests were to visit their house, Philaret was very happy, but Theoseba was sad, for they did not have enough food. But Philaret

told his wife to light the fire and to decorate their home. Their neighbors, knowing that imperial envoys were expected, brought everything required for a rich feast.

The envoys were impressed by the saint's daughters and granddaughters. Seeing their beauty, their deportment, their clothing, and their admirable qualities, the envoys agreed that Philaret's granddaughter, Maria was exactly what they were looking for. This Maria exceeded all her rivals in quality and modesty and indeed became Constantine's wife, and the emperor rewarded Philaret.

Thus fame and riches returned to Philaret. But just as before, this holy lover of the poor generously distributed alms and provided a feast for the poor. He and his family served them at the meal. Everyone was astonished at his humility and said: "This is a man of God, a true disciple of Christ."

He ordered a servant to take three bags and fill one with gold, one with silver, and one with copper coins. When a beggar approached, Philaret ordered his servant to bring forth one of the bags, whichever God's providence would ordain. Then he would reach into the bag and give to each person, as much as God willed.

St Philaret refused to wear fine clothes, nor would he accept any imperial rank. He said it was enough for him to be called the grandfather of the Empress. The saint reached ninety years of age and knew his end was approaching. He went to the Rodolpheia ("The Judgment") monastery in Constantinople. He gave some gold to the Abbess and asked her to allow him to be buried there, saying that he would depart this life in ten days.

He returned home and became ill. On the tenth day he summoned his family, he exhorted them to imitate his love for the poor if they desired salvation. Then he fell asleep in the Lord. He died in the year 792 and was buried in the Rodolpheia Judgment monastery in Constantinople.

The appearance of a miracle after his death confirmed the

sainthood of Righteous Philaret. As they bore the body of the saint to the cemetery, a certain man, possessed by the devil, followed the funeral procession and tried to overturn the coffin. When they reached the grave, the devil threw the man down on the ground and went out of him. Many other miracles and healings also took place at the grave of the saint.

After the death of the righteous Philaret, his wife Theoseba worked at restoring monasteries and churches devastated during a barbarian invasion.

This merciful saint trusted God the Spiritual Father. He cashed in on the promise, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well."

In terms of [how to survive an economic depression](#), the right question to ask is *not*, "Do I have enough treasures stored up on earth?" but "Do I have enough treasures in Heaven?" And the merciful St. Philaret lived a life out of abundant treasure in Heaven.

The biggest thing we need right now is to know the point of life, which is to live the life of Heaven, not starting at death, but starting here on earth. C.S. Lewis lectured to students on the eve of World War II when it looked like Western civilization was on the verge of permanent collapse. I won't try to repeat what he said beyond "Life has never been normal" and add that God's providence is for difficult circumstances every bit as much as when life seems normal. God's providence is how we can survive an economic depression. [The Sermon on the Mount](#) is no mere wish list only for when life that is perfect; it is meant for God's work with us even in circumstances we would not choose, *especially* in circumstances we would not choose, and speaks of the love of God the Spiritual Father who can and will work with us in an economic depression, if we will let him, and work with us no less than when life is easy.

(Some have said not only that God provides in rough times as well as easy times, but that God's providence is in fact clearer in rough times, such as an economic depression, than when things go our way and we can

forget that we need a bit of help from above.)

God the Spiritual Father wants to use everything for our good. Everything he allows, everything in our lives, is either a blessing or a temptation that has been allowed for our strengthening. His purpose even in allowing rough things to happen is to help us grow up spiritually, and to make us Heavenly. [The Great Divorce](#) imagines a busload of people come from Hell to visit Heaven, and what happens is something much like what happens in our lives: they are offered Heaven and they do not realize Heaven is better than the seeds Hell that they keep clinging to because they are afraid to let go. Heaven and Hell are both real, but God does not send people to Hell. C.S. Lewis quotes someone saying that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "*Thy* will be done," respecting their choice to choose Hell after Heaven has been freely offered to them. The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the inside. Hellfire is nothing other than the Light of Heaven as experienced by those who reject the only possibility for living joy there is. And neither the reality of Heaven nor the state of mind we call Hell begins after death; their seeds grow on us in this training ground we call life. We can become saints, heavenly people like St. Philaret, or we can care only about ourselves and our own survival. God the Spiritual Father wants to shape us to be part of the beauty of Heaven, and everything he sends us is intended for that purpose. But in freedom he will let us veto his blessings and choose to be in Hell.

Heaven is generous, and that generosity was something Heavenly that shone during the Great Depression. People who had very little shared. They shared money or food, if they had any. (And even if you have no money to share, you can share time; if you do not have a job, you can still volunteer.) St. Philaret shared because he knew something: "Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about 'these least ones' (Mt. 25:40)..." In this part of the saint's life, the reference is to some of the most chilling words following [The Sermon on the Mount](#) in the Gospel:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with

him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?"

And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?"

Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

St. Philaret the Merciful will be greeted before Christ's awesome judgment seat and hear, "Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I came to you and asked for a little wheat, and you gave me all six bushels you had, and your only donkey with them " God did provide but the reward is not just that a friend gave him

them. God did provide, but the reward is not just that a friend gave him forty bushels of wheat. The ultimate reward is that Christ regards how St. Philaret treated other people as how he treated Christ himself, and because St. Philaret was merciful, there is a reward for him in Heaven, a reward so great that next to it, the forty bushels of wheat from his friend utterly pale in comparison.

Remember this next time you see a beggar. If you can't give a quarter, at least see if there is a kind word or a prayer you can give. This has everything to do with [how to survive an economic depression](#).

We are at a time with terrible prospects for earthly comfort, but take heart. Let me again quote Lewis: "Heaven cannot give earthly comfort, and earth cannot give earthly comfort either. In the end, Heavenly comfort is the only comfort to be had. To quote from my own [Silence: Organic Food for the Soul](#):

Do you worry? Is it terribly hard
to get all your ducks in a row,
to get yourself to a secure place
where you have prepared for what might happen?
Or does it look like you might lose your job,
if you still have one?
[The Sermon on the Mount](#)
urges people to pray,
"Give us this day our daily bread,"
in an economy
when unlike many homeless in the U.S. today,
it was not obvious to many
where they would get their next meal.
And yet it was this [Sermon on the Mount](#)
that tells us our Heavenly Father will provide for us,
and tells us not to worry:
what we miss
if we find this a bit puzzling,
we who may have bank accounts, insurance, investments
even if they are jeopardized right now,
is that we are like a child with some clay,

trying to satisfy ourselves by making a clay horse,
with clay that never cooperates, never looks right,
and obsessed with clay that is never good enough,
we ignore and maybe fear
the finger tapping us on our shoulder
until with great trepidation we turn,
and listen to the voice say,
"Stop trying so hard. Let it go,"
and follow our father
as he gives us a warhorse.

This life is an apprenticeship, and even now, when we may be in situations we do not like, God is asking us to be apprentices, learning to be knights riding the warhorse he gives us *even in the situations we might not like*. The life of Heaven begins on earth, *even in an economic depression*.

However much power world leaders may have, God the Spiritual Father is sovereign, and their summits pale in comparison for the work God the Spiritual Father is working even now.

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his Christ, saying,
"Let us rip apart their religious restrictions,
and throw off their shackles."
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.

[Psalms](#)

For the conqueror says: "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples; and as men gather eggs that

have been forsaken so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped."

Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!

Isaiah

World leaders may work his will as instruments or as sons, but they will always work his will. This is true in an economic depression as much as any other time. God the Spiritual Father rules the world as sovereign on a deeper level than we can imagine, and he works good out of everything to those who love him and are called according to his purpose to make them sons of God.

Some people really hope that if the right government programs are in place, we can get back on track to a better life. But even if governments have their place, "Put not your trust in princes," or rather, "Do not put your trust in governments," is not obsolete. Far from it: government initiatives cannot make everything better, even in the long haul, even with lots of time, sacrifices, and resources. But having given that bad news, I have good news too. Even if government initiatives fail to do what we want them to, we have God the Spiritual Father trying to give us the greatest good, and the time he offers us his will does not start sometime in the future: it is for *here*, and it is for **now**. He works his will alike through instruments like Satan and Judas, and sons like Peter and John, but in either case he works his will now, not sometime in the future when some human effort starts achieving results. Again, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man might become god and the sons of God.

St. Maximus Confessor

There was one time when two theology professors were talking when

the weather was very rough. One of them said, "This is the day that the Lord has made," and the other said, "Well, he's done better!" And the joke may be funny, but sun and rain, heat and cold, are all given by God. We miss something if we only think God is working with us if it is warm and sunny, if we find ourselves in a violent storm and assume God must have abandoned us, if it seems that God can't or won't help us because the weather is so bad.

And we are missing something if we look at the news and the world around us, and want to say, "This is the day that the Lord has made... he's done better!"

If we are in an economic depression, say, "This is the day that the Lord has made." You're missing something if you need to add, "Well, he's done better!"

A friend quoted to me when I was in a rough spot,

"Life's Tapestry"

Behind those golden clouds up there
the Great One sews a priceless embroidery
and since down below we walk
we see, my child, the reverse view.
And consequently it is natural for the mind to see mistakes
there where one must give thanks and glorify.

Wait as a Christian for that day to come
where your soul a-wing will rip through the air
and you shall see the embroidery of God
from the good side
and then... everything will seem to you to be a system and order.

And it is true. It is not just, as some have said, that *God's address is at the end of your rope*. That is where you meet God best. It may be easier, not harder, to find God and his providential care in an economic depression. God is working a plan of eternal glory. Westminster opens with the great question, "What is the chief end of man?" and answers, "To

glorify God and enjoy him forever." But there is a deeper answer. *The chief end of man is to become Christ.* The chief end of man is to become by grace what Christ is by nature. God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man and the sons of man might become gods and the sons of God. The Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God. The divine became human that the human might become divine. This saying has rumbled down through the ages: not only the entire point of being human, but the entire point of each and every circumstance God the Spiritual Father allows to come to us, as a blessing or as a temptation allowed for our strengthening, as God's will working through instruments or sons, is to make us share in Christ's divinity, and [the saints' lives](#) show few saints who met this purpose when everything went their way, and a great many where God worked in them precisely in rough and painful circumstances. If we watch the news and say, "This is the day the Lord has made. Well, he's done better," try to open your eyes to the possibility that "Well, he's done better" is what people want to say when, in the words of C.S. Lewis in [The Chronicles of Narnia](#), "*Aslan is on the move.*"

Christ's Incarnation is humble. It began humbly, in the scandalous pregnancy of an unwed teen mother, and it unfolds humbly in our lives. Its humble unfolding in our lives comes perhaps best when we have rough times and rough lives, in circumstances we would not choose, in an economic depression above all. You do not understand Christ's Incarnation unless you understand that it is an Incarnation in humility, humble times, and humble conditions. You do not understand Christ's humble Incarnation until you understand that it did not stop when the Mother of God's scandalous pregnancy began: Christ's humble Incarnation unfolds and unfurls in the Church, in the Saints, and Christ wishes to be Incarnate in every one of us. Christ wishes to be Incarnate in all of us, not in the circumstances we would choose for ourselves, but in the circumstances we are in, when God the Spiritual Father works everything to good for his sons.

Take heart if this sounds hard, like a tall order to live up to. It is hard for me too. It is hard, very hard, or at least it is for me. But it is worth trying to live up to. Even if we do not always succeed.

God became man that man might become God. In whatever circumstances God gives us to train us, as God the Spiritual Father, let us grow as sons of God.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.*

"Religion and Science" Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution

A rude awakening

Early in one systematic theology PhD course at Fordham, the text assigned as theology opened by saying, "Theologians are scientists, and they are every bit as much scientists as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics." Not content with this striking claim, the author announced that she was going to use "a term from science," *thought experiment*, which was never used to mean a *Gedanken* experiment as in physics, but instead meant: if we have an idea for how a society should run, we have to experimentally try out this thought and live with it for a while, because if we don't, we will never know what would have happened. ("*Stick your neck out! What have you got to lose?*"—"Your head?") The clumsiness in this use of "a term from science" was on par with saying that you are going to use "an expression from American English", namely *rabbit food*, and subsequently use "rabbit food" as obviously a term meaning food made with rabbit meat.

In this one article were already two things that were fingernails on a chalkboard to my ears. Empirical sciences are today's prestige disciplines, like philosophy / theology / law in bygone eras, and the claim to be a science seems to inevitably be *how to mediate prestige to oneself and one's own discipline*. When I had earlier run into claims of, "Anthropologists are scientists, and they are every bit as much scientists

as people in the so-called 'hard sciences,' like physics," I had winced because the claim struck me as not only annoying and untrue, but self-demeaning. But it simply had not occurred to me that theologians would make such a claim, and when they did, I was not only shocked but embarrassed: why should theology, once acclaimed the queen of scholarly disciplines, now seek prestige by parroting the claim to be every-bit-as-much-a-science-as-the-so-called-"hard-sciences"-like-physics (where "so-called" seemed to always be part of the claim, along with the scare quotes around "hard sciences")? To make my point clearer, I drew what was meant to be a shocking analogy: the claim that theologians are "scientists, and every bit as much as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics" was like trying to defend the dignity of being a woman by saying, "Women are male, and they are just as much male as people who can sire a child."

This "physics envy" looks particularly strange next to the medieval Great Chain of Being as it moved from the highest to the lowest: "God, Angels, Man, Animals, Plants, Rocks, Nothing". Theology is the study of God and Man; no discipline is given a more noble field. And however much other disciplines may have "physics envy", no other discipline looks lower than physics, the science that studies Rocks and Nothing. There may be something pathetic about an anthropologist trying to step up on the pecking order by claiming to be "just as much scientists as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics." Yet on the lips of a theologian, it bears a faint hint of a CEO absurdly saying, "CEOs are janitors, and they are every bit as much janitors as the people responsible for cleaning wastebaskets."

Furthermore, the endemic claim I saw to introduce a "term from science" was, so far as I could remember:

- *Rarely if ever used in any correct fashion.*

The *one* exception I can remember being Wolfhart Pannenberg's illustration of a point by talking about fields such as one finds in the study of electricity and magnetism: the non-scientist theologians in the room said they were having real trouble understanding the illustration conceptually, which would make it seem somewhat

dubious as an *illustration* to help get a point across.

- *Always reflect an effort to claim some of science's prestige.*

I remember the "you're being quaint" smiles I got when I suggested that a point that Pannenberg was trying to make by comparing something to a field as defined in physics, seemed in fact to be a point that could have been much better made by a comparison to the Force from *Star Wars*.

Why the patronizing smiles? The job of the example from physics was to mediate prestige as well as to illustrate a concept that could have been better explained without involving a particularly slippery concept from physics.

A first response

Examples of this kind of "science" abounded, and I was perhaps not wise enough to realize that my clumsy attempts to clarify various misrepresentations of science were perhaps not well received because I was stepping on the Dark and Shameful Secret of Not Being Scientific Enough, and reminding them of an inferiority they were trying hard to dodge. And my attempts to explain "Not being a scientist does not make you inferior" seemed to have no soil in which to grow. In an attempt to start an online discussion, I wrote a piece called "Rumor Science":

I really wish the theology students I knew would either know a lot more about science, or a lot less, and I really wouldn't consider "a lot less" to be disappointing.

Let me explain why. When I was working on my master's in math, there was one passage in particular that struck me from Ann Wilson Schaef's *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System*. Perhaps predictably given my being a mathematician in training, it was a remark about numbers, or rather about how people interact with numbers.

The author broke people down into more or less three groups of people. The first—she mentioned artists—was people that can't count to twenty without taking off their shoes. She didn't quite say **that**, but she emphasized artists and other people where math and numbers simply aren't part of their consciousness. They don't buy into the mystique. And they can say, and sincerely mean, that numbers don't measure everything. They aren't seriously tempted to believe otherwise.

The second group—she mentioned business people—consists of people for whom math works. Even if they're not mathematicians, math works for them and does useful things, and they may say that numbers don't measure anything, but it is well nigh impossible to believe—saying and meaning that numbers don't measure everything is like saying that cars are nice but they can't get you places.

And the third group in the progression? She mentioned scientists, but what she said was that they know math in and out and know it so well that they know its limitations and therefore they can say and mean that numbers don't measure everything. And in the end, even though the "scientist" and the "artist" represent opposite extremes of mathematical competence, they both know there are things numbers can't measure while the second, middle group for mathematical competence are in a position where they expect numbers to do things that numbers can't do.

I was flattered, but I really think it stuck with me for more reasons than just the fact that she included me in one of the "good" groups. There is a sort of *Karate Kid* observation—"Karate is like a road. Know karate, safe. Don't know karate, safe. In the middle, *squash*, like a grape!"—that is relevant to theology and science. It has to do with, among other things, Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, the question of evolution, and the like (perhaps I should mention the second law of thermodynamics). My point in this is not that there is an obligation to "know karate", that theologians need to earn degrees in the sciences before they are qualified to work as theologians, but that there is something perfectly respectable about "don't know karate."

I'd like to start by talking about Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. Now a lot of people have heard about Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. Not many major mathematical theorems have had a Pulitzer prize-winning book written around them (and by the way, *Gödel, Escher, Bach* has been one of my favorite books). Nor do many theorems get summarized in Newsweek as an important theorem which demonstrates that mathematical "proofs" are not certain, but mathematical knowledge is as relative as any other knowledge.

Which is a crass error. The theological equivalent would be to say that Karl Barth's unflattering remarks about "religion" are anti-Christian, or that liberation theology's preferential option for the

poor means that special concern for the poor is optional and to be dealt with according to personal preference. And saying that about liberation theology is a theological "squash like a grape," because it is better to not know liberation theology and know you don't know than believe that you understand liberation theology and "know" that the word "option" implies "optional." **It's not what you don't know that hurts you, but what you know that ain't so.**

For the record, what Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem means is that for a certain branch of mathematics, there are things that can be neither proven nor disproven—which made his theorem a shocker when there was a Tower of Babel effort to prove or disprove pretty much anything. It proves that some things can never be proven within certain systems. And it has other implications. But it does *not* mean that things that are proven in mathematics are uncertain, or that mathematical knowledge is relative. It says you can't prove everything a mathematician would want to prove. But there are still lots and lots and lots of interesting things that can be proven, and Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem does not touch these proofs, nor does it mean that mathematical knowledge is merely relative in humanities fashion.

And I'd like to mention what happens when I mention Gödel's **Completeness** Theorem:

Dead silence.

The same great mathematical logician proved another theorem, which does not have a Pulitzer prize winning book, which says that in one other branch of mathematics, besides the branch that Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem speaks to, you can have pretty much what Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem says you can't have in the other branch. In other words, you can—mechanically, for that matter, which is a big mathematical achievement—either prove or disprove every single statement. I'm not sure it's as important as Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, but it's a major theorem from the same mathematician and no one's heard of it.

There would seem to be obvious non-mathematical reasons for why people would want to be informed about the first theorem and not want to mention the second. I consider it telling (about non-mathematical culture). I know it may be considered a mark of sophistication to mention Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem and share how it's informed your epistemology. But it hasn't informed my epistemology and I really can't tell how my theology would be different if I hadn't heard of it. And my understanding is that other mathematicians tend not to have the highest view of people who are trying to take account of scientific discoveries that an educated person "should" know. There are other reasons for this, including goofy apologetics that make the famous theorem a proof for God. But I at least would rather talk with someone who simply hadn't heard of the theorem than a theologian who had tried to make a "responsible" effort to learn from the discovery.

And my main example is one I'm less sure how to comment on, and not only because I know less biology than math. There was one almost flippant moment in England when the curate asked if anybody had questions about the upcoming Student Evolution conference that everybody was being urged to attend. I asked, "Is this 'Student Evolution' more of a gradual process, or more a matter of 'punk eek'?" (That question brought down the house.)

Punctuated equilibrium, irreverently abbreviated 'punk eek', is a very interesting modification of Darwinian theory. Darwinian *evolution* in its early forms posits and implies a gradual process of very slow changes—almost constant over very long ("geological") time frames. And that is a beautiful theory that flatly contracts almost all known data.

As explained by my Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy biology teacher, "Evolution is like baseball. It has long stretches of boring time interrupted by brief periods of intense excitement." That's punk eek in a nutshell, and what interests me most is that it's the mirror image of saying "God created the world—through evolution!" It says, "Evolution occurred—through punctuated equilibrium!"

That's not the only problem; evolution appears to be, in Kuhnian terms (Structure of Scientific Revolutions), a theory "in crisis", which is the Kuhnian term for when a scientific theory is having serious difficulties accounting for currently given data and may well be on its way out the door. There are several ways people are trying to cope with this—preserving some semblance of a materialist explanation; there was the same kind of resistance going on before science acknowledged the Big Bang, because scientists who want a universe without cause and without beginning or creator heard something that sounded too much like "Let there be light!" They're very interesting, and intellectually dishonest.

Now I need to clarify; people seem to think you have to either be a young earth creationist or else admit evolution of some stripe. I believe in 13 billion years as the rough age of the universe, not six thousand years; I also believe in natural selection and something called "micro-evolution." (By the way, JPII's "more than a hypothesis" was in the original French "*plus qu'un hypothèse*", alternately translatable as "more than one hypothesis", and the official Vatican translation takes this reading. One can say that micro-evolution is one of the hypothesis gathered under the heading of evolution.)

I wince when I see theologians trying their dutiful best to work out an obligation to take evolution into account as a proven fact: squash, like a grape. It's not just that science doesn't trade in proof and evolution is being treated like a revelation, as if a Pope had consulted the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences and canonized *The Origin of the Species* as a book of the Bible. Or maybe that's putting it too strongly. It would also be strong language to say that many theologians are adopting a carefully critical attitude to classic Church claims and part of their being critical means placing an embarrassingly blind faith in evolution. But that's truer than I'd want to admit.

What about the second law of thermodynamics?

I don't know what the first and third laws of thermodynamics

say, and I can't say that I'm missing anything. I don't feel obligated to make the second law, which I am familiar with, a feature of my theology, but if I did, I would try to understand the first and third laws of thermodynamics, and treat it as physics in which those three laws and presumably other things fit into a system that needs to be treated as a whole. I don't know how I would incorporate that in my theology, but I'm supposing for the sake of argument that I would. I would rather avoid treating it the way people usually seem to treat it when they treat that as one of the things that educated people "should" know.

I guess that my point in all of this is that some people think there's a duty to know science and be scientific in theology, but this is a duty better shirked. My theology is—or I would like it to be—closer to that of someone who doesn't understand science, period, than that of people who try to improve their theology by incorporating what they can grasp of difficult scientific concepts that the scientists themselves learned with difficulty.

Rumor science is worse than no science, and an ascientific theology is not a handicap. When I say that I would rather see theologians know either much more or much less science, I'm not hoping that theologians will therefore get scientific degrees. The chief merit for a theologian to know science is that it can be a source of liberation that frees people from thinking "We live in a scientific age so it would be better for theology to be scientific." I'm not sure I would be able to question that assumption if I knew much less science. *But what I believe that buys me is not a better theology than someone scientifically innocent but freedom from the perceived need to "take science into account" in my theology so I can do the same kind of theology as someone scientifically innocent.*

I'm not as sure what to say about ecological theology; I wrote [Hymn to the Creator of Heaven and Earth](#) at without scientific reference that I remember, and I believe there are other human ways of knowing Creation besides science. But an ecological theologian who draws on scientific studies is not trying to honor a duty to understand things an educated person should know, but pursuing

something materially relevant. Science has some place; religion and science boundary issues are legitimate, and I don't know I can dissuade people who think it's progressive to try to make a scientific theology—although I really wish people with that interest would get letters after their name from a science discipline, or some other form of genuinely proper scientific credentials appropriate to a genuinely scientific theology.

There are probably other exceptions, and science is interesting. But there is no obligation to go from safely on one side of the road to a position in the middle because it is "closer" to a proper understanding of science. Perhaps liberation theologians want people to understand their cause, but it is better not to pretend to know liberation theology than to approach it in a way that leaves you "knowing" that the preferential option is optional. *It isn't what you know that hurts you, but what you know that ain't so*—and rumor science, with its accepted list of important scientific knowledge that scholars need to take into account, is one way to learn from what ain't so.

Science is the prestige discipline(s) today; you see psychology wishing for its Newton to lead it into the promised land of being a science in the fullest sense of the term. You don't see psychology pining for a Shakespeare to lead it into the promised land of being a humanity in the fullest sense of the term. And the social disciplines—I intentionally do not say social **sciences** because they are legitimate academic disciplines but not sciences—are constantly insisting that their members are scientists, but *the claim that theologians are scientists annoys me as a scientist and almost offends me as a theologian*. It should be offensive for much the same reason that it should be offensive to insist on female dignity by claiming that women are really male, and that they are just as much male as people who can sire a child.

It would be an interesting theological work to analyze today's cultural assumptions surrounding science, which are quite important and not dictated by scientific knowledge itself, and then come to almost the same freedom as someone innocent of science.

"My theology," *ewwww*. (While I was at it, why didn't I discuss plans for my own private sun and moon? I'm *not* proud of proudly discussing "my theology".) I know the text has a wart or two.

But the piece contains a suggestion: "rumor science" may be a red flag to a real problem in the place we give science.

Pondering Einstein, or at least dropping his name

That work left out the crowning jewel of scientific theories to ponder in "rumor science": Einstein's "theory of relativity." Some time later, in my science fiction short story / Socratic dialogue, [The Steel Orb](#), I wrote in fiction something that picked up what I had left out:

Art sat back. "I'd be surprised if you're not a real scientist. I imagine that in your world you know things that our scientists will not know for centuries."

Oinos sat back and sat still for a time, closing his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and said, "What have you learned from science?"

"I've spent a lot of time lately, wondering what Einstein's theory of relativity means for us today: even the 'hard' sciences are relative, and what 'reality' is, depends greatly on your own perspective. Even in the hardest sciences, it is fundamentally mistaken to be looking for absolute truth."

Oinos leaned forward, paused, and then tapped the table four different places. In front of Art appeared a gridlike object which Art recognized with a start as a scientific calculator like his son's. "Very well. Let me ask you a question. Relative to your frame of reference, an object of one kilogram rest mass is moving away from you at a speed of one tenth the speed of light. What, from your present frame of reference, is its effective mass?"

Art hesitated, and began to sit up.

Oinos said, "If you'd prefer, the table can be set to function as any major brand of calculator you're familiar with. Or would you prefer a computer with Matlab or Mathematica? The remainder of the table's surface can be used to browse the appropriate manuals."

Art shrunk slightly towards his chair.

Oinos said, "I'll give you hints. In the theory of relativity, objects can have an effective mass of above their rest mass, but never below it. Furthermore, most calculations of this type tend to have anything that changes, change by a factor of the inverse of the square root of the quantity: one minus the square of the object's speed divided by the square of the speed of light. Do you need me to explain the buttons on the calculator?"

Art shrunk into his chair. "I don't know all of those technical details, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about relativity."

Oinos said, "If you are unable to answer that question before I started dropping hints, let alone after I gave hints, you should not pose as having contemplated what relativity means for us today. I'm not trying to humiliate you. But the first question I asked is the kind of question a teacher would put on a quiz to see if students were awake and not playing video games for most of the first lecture. I know it's fashionable in your world to drop Einstein's name as someone you have deeply pondered. It is also extraordinarily silly. I have noticed that scientists who have a good understanding of relativity often work without presenting themselves as having these deep ponderings about what Einstein means for them today. Trying to deeply ponder Einstein without learning even the basics of relativistic physics is like trying to write the next Nobel prize-winning German novel without being bothered to learn even the most rudimentary German vocabulary and grammar."

"But don't you think that relativity makes a big difference?"

"On a poetic level, I think it is an interesting development in your world's history for a breakthrough in science, Einstein's theory of relativity, to say that what is absolute is not time, but light. Space and time bend before light. There is a poetic beauty to Einstein making an unprecedented absolute out of light. But let us leave poetic appreciation of Einstein's theory aside.

"You might be interested to know that the differences predicted by Einstein's theory of relativity are so minute that decades passed

by Einstein's theory of relativity are so minute that decades passed between Einstein making the theory of relativity and people being able to use a sensitive enough clock to measure the microscopically small difference of the so-called 'twins paradox' by bringing an atomic clock on an airplane. The answer to the problem I gave you is that for a tenth the speed of light—which is faster than you can imagine, and well over a thousand times the top speed of the fastest supersonic vehicle your world will ever make—is one half of one percent. It's a disappointingly small increase for a rather astounding speed. If the supersonic Skylon is ever built, would you care to guess the increase in effective mass as it travels at an astounding Mach 5.5?"

"Um, I don't know..."

"Can you guess? Half its mass? The mass of a car? Or just the mass of a normal-sized adult?"

"Is this a trick question? Fifty pounds?"

"The effective mass increases above the rest mass, for that massive vehicle running at about five times the speed of sound and almost twice the top speed of the SR-71 Blackbird, is something like the mass of a mosquito."

"A *mosquito*? You're joking, right?"

"No. It's an underwhelming, *microscopic* difference for what relativity says when the rumor mill has it that Einstein taught us that hard sciences are as fuzzy as anything else... or that perhaps, in Star Wars terms, 'Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on your own point of view.' Under Einstein, you will in fact **not** find that many of the observations that we cling to, depend greatly on your own frame of reference. You have to be doing something pretty exotic to have relativity make any measurable difference from the older physics at all."

"Rumor science": The tip of an iceberg?

But I would like to get on to something that is of far greater concern than "rumor science" as it treats Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, the second law of thermodynamics, relativity, evolution, and so on. If the only problem was making a bit of a hash of some scientific theories, that would be one thing. But "rumor science" may be the tip of an iceberg, a telling clue that something may be seriously amiss in how theology has been relating to science. There is another, far more serious boundary issue.

There is something about the nature of academic theology today that may become clearer if we ask questions about the nature of knowledge and line up academic theology with Orthodoxy on the one hand and modern science on the other. The table below lists a few questions connected with knowledge, and then a comparison between Orthodox Christianity, academic theology, and modern science in their own columns:

Question	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
<i>What is knowledge like?</i>	"Adam knew Eve..." The primary word in the Old and New Testaments for sexual union is in fact 'know', and this is a significant clue about the intimate nature of knowledge. Knowledge is, at its core, the knowledge that drinks. It connects at a deepest level, and is cognate to how Orthodox say	Knowledge is <i>critical</i> , meaning <i>detached</i> : the privileged position is of the outsider who stands clear of a situation and looks into a window. The devout believer enjoys no real advantage in grasping his religion compared to the methodical	You can't know how stars age or the limitations of the ideal gas law from direct personal experience. Science stems from a rationalism cognate to the Enlightenment, and even if one rebels against the Enlightenment,

to how Orthodox say of the Holy Mysteries, "We have seen the true Light!": to receive the Eucharist is to know.

observer who remains detached —and the ordinary believer may be at a marked disadvantage.

it's awfully hard to know quarks and leptons solely by the intimacy of personal experience.

This may not be part of the standard Western picture, but the Orthodox, non-materialist

understanding of mind holds that there is a sort of "spiritual eye" which knows and which grasps spiritual realities as overflow to its central purpose of worshiping God.

The center of gravity for knowing is this spiritual eye, and it is the center of a whole and integrated person. Logical and other "discursive" reasoning may have a place, but the seat of this kind of reasoning is a moon next to the light of the sun which is the spiritual eye, the *nous*.

Good scholarship comes from putting all other aspects of the person in their place and enthroning the part of us that reasons logically and almost putting the logic bit on steroids.

Continental philosophy may rebel against this, but it rebels after starting from this point.

We have a slightly more rigorous use of primarily logical reasoning and a subject domain that allows this reasoning to shine.

What aspect of yourself do you know with?

They should train

They should train students to

What should teachers cultivate in their students? Teachers should induce students into *discipleship* and should be exemplary disciples themselves. students who will not be content with their teachers' interpretations but push past to their own takes on the matter. develop experiments and theories to carefully challenge the "present working picture" in their field.

What is tradition, and how does your tradition relate to knowing? One may be not so much *under Tradition as in Tradition*: Tradition is like one's culture or language, if a culture and language breathed on by the Holy Spirit of God. Though the matrix of Tradition need not be viewed with legalistic fundamentalism, it is missing something important to fail to love and revere Tradition as something of a

Something of the attitude is captured in what followed the telling of an anecdote about a New Testament Greek class where the professor had difficulties telling how to read a short text, until a classics student looked and suggested that the difficulty would evaporate if the text were read with a different set of accents from what scholars traditionally assigned it. The Greek professor's response ("Accents are not inspired!") was presented by the academic theologian

As Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman observed, "You get to be part of the establishment by blowing up part of the establishment."

mother.

theologian
retelling this story

as full warrant to
suggest that
scholars should
not view
themselves as
bound by *tradition*
with its blind
spots.

*How much
emphasis
do you
place on
creativity?*

It reflects some
degree of
fundamental
confusion to
measure the value of
what someone says
by how original it is.
That which is true is
not original, and that
which is original is
not true. Perhaps
people may uncover
new layers of
meaning, but to
measure someone by
how many ideas he
can claim as "mine"
is a strange measure.

Publish something
original, or perish.
Better to say
something original
but not true than
not have any ideas
to claim as "mine."
If need be,
rehabilitate Arius
or Nestorius. (Or,
if you are
Orthodox, meet
current fashions
halfway and show
that St. Augustine
need not be a
whipping boy.)

Continue to push
the envelope. Are
you an
experimental
physicist? If you
cannot observe
anything new by
the layman's
means of
observation,
pioneer new
equipment or a
clever experiment
to push the
envelope of what
can be observed.
Publish
something
original or perish.

There is a very real
sense of empiricism,
albeit a sense that
has very little
directly to do with
empirical science.
Knowledge is what

~~Theologians are
just as empirical as
physicists whether~~

As much as
theology's
empiricism is the
empiricism of a
knowledge of the
"spiritual eye" and
the whole person,
our empiricism is

Where does your discipline place its empiricism?

you know through the "spiritual eye" and it is a knowledge that can only be realized through direct participation. An "idle word" may be a word of that which you do not have this knowledge of, and this sin would appear to be foundational to the empiricism of science. We really do have an empiricism, but it might be better not to engender pointless confusion by claiming to be empirical when the empiricism known to the academy is pre-eminently that of empirical science, whether it is either actual or aspiring science.

~~physicists, whether or not they know basic statistics.~~ We have such quasi-scientific empiricism as can be had for the human and divine domain we cover; there is a great deal of diversity, and some of us do not place much emphasis on the empiricism of science, but some of us have enough of scientific empiricism to do history work that stands its ground when judged by secular history's standards.

an empiricism of detached, careful, methodical, reasoned investigation—the investigation of the reasoning faculty on steroids. Our science exhibits professionalism and a particular vision of intellectual virtue. Our empiricism corresponds to this vision, and no one has pushed this empiricism of the reasoning faculty further, and the unique technology founded on science is a testament to how far we have pushed this kind of empiricism.

When they are lined up, academic theology appears to have a great many continuities with science and a real disconnect with Orthodox Christianity. Could academic theologians feel an inferiority complex about Not Being Scientific Enough? Absolutely. But the actual problem may be that they are entirely *too* scientific. I am less concerned that their theology is not sufficiently scientific than that it is not sufficiently *theological*.

Origins questions: can we dig deeper?

It is along those lines that I have taken something of the track of "join the enemy's camp to show its weaknesses from within" in exposing the blind spots of Darwinism, for instance. In the theologically driven short story [The Commentary](#), the issue is not really whether Darwinism is correct at all. The question is not whether we should be content with Darwinian answers, but whether we should be content with Darwinian *questions*.

Martin stepped into his house and decided to have no more distractions. He wanted to begin reading commentary, now. He opened the book on the table and sat erect in his chair:

Genesis

1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

1:2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

1:3 And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

The reader is now thinking about evolution. He is wondering whether Genesis 1 is right, and evolution is simply wrong, or whether evolution is right, and Genesis 1 is a myth that may be inspiring enough but does not actually tell how the world was created.

All of this is because of a culture phenomenally influenced by scientism and science. The theory of evolution is an attempt to map out, in terms appropriate to scientific dialogue, just what organisms occurred, when, and what mechanism led there to be new kinds of organisms that did not exist before. Therefore, nearly all Evangelicals assumed, Genesis 1 must be the Christian substitute for evolution. Its purpose must also be to map out what occurred when, to provide the same sort of mechanism. In

short, if Genesis 1 is true, then it must be trying to answer the same question as evolution, only answering it differently.

Darwinian evolution is not a true answer to the question, "Why is there life as we know it?" Evolution is on philosophical grounds *not* a true answer to that question, because it is not an answer to that question at all. Even if it is true, evolution is only an answer to the question, "*How* is there life as we know it?" If someone asks, "Why is there this life that we see?" and someone answers, "Evolution," it is like someone saying, "Why is the kitchen light on?" and someone else answering, "Because the switch is in the on position, thereby closing the electrical circuit and allowing current to flow through the bulb, which grows hot and produces light."

Where the reader only sees one question, an ancient reader saw at least two other questions that are invisible to the present reader. As well as the question of "How?" that evolution addresses, there is the question of "Why?" and "What function does it serve?" These two questions are very important, and are not even considered when people are only trying to work out the antagonism between creationism and evolutionism.

Martin took a deep breath. Was the text advocating a six-day creationism? That was hard to tell. He felt uncomfortable, in a much deeper way than if Bible-thumpers were preaching to him that evolutionists would burn in Hell.

There is a hint here of why some people who do not believe in a young earth are no less concerned about young earth creationism: the concern is not exactly that it is junk science, but precisely that it is *too* scientific, assuming many of evolutionary theory's blindnesses even as it asserts the full literal truth of the Bible in answering questions on the terms of what science asks of an origins theory.

There is an Dilbert strip which goes as follows:

Pointy-haired boss: I'm sending you to Elbonia to teach a

class on Cobol on Thursday.

Dilbert: But I don't know Cobol. Can't you ask Wally? He knows Cobol!

Pointy-haired boss: I already checked, and he's busy on Thursday.

Dilbert: Can't you reschedule?

Pointy-haired boss: Ok, are you free on Tuesday?

Dilbert: You're answering the wrong question!

Dilbert's mortified, "You're answering the wrong question!" has some slight relevance the issues of religion and science: in my homily, [Two Decisive Moments](#) I tried to ask people to look, and aim, *higher*:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There is a classic Monty Python "game show": the moderator asks one of the contestants the second question: "In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" The contestant looks at him with a blank stare, and then he opens the question up to the other contestants: "Anyone? In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" And there is dead silence, until the moderator says, "Now, I'm not surprised that none of you got that. It is in fact a trick question. Coventry City has *never* won the English Cup."

I'd like to dig into another trick question: "When was the world created: 13.7 billion years ago, or about six thousand years ago?" The answer in fact is "Neither," but it takes some explaining to get to the point of realizing that the world was created 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD.

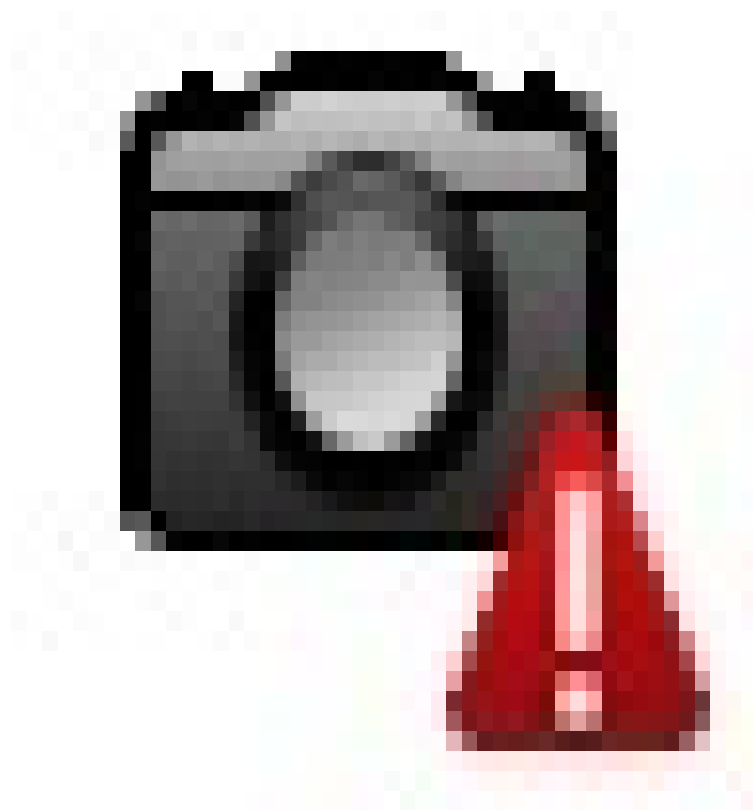
Adam fell and dragged down the whole realm of nature. God had and has every authority to repudiate Adam, to destroy him, but in fact God did something different. He called Noah, Abraham,

Moses, and Elijah, and in the fullness of time he didn't just call a prophet; he sent his Son to become a prophet and more.

It's possible to say something that means more than you realize. Caiaphas, the high priest, did this when he said, "It is better that one man be killed than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50) This also happened when Pilate sent Christ out, flogged, clothed in a purple robe, and said, "*Behold the man!*"

What does this mean? It means more than Pilate could have possibly dreamed of, and "Adam" means "man": *Behold the man! Behold Adam, but not the Adam who sinned against God and dragged down the Creation in his rebellion, but the second Adam, the new Adam, the last Adam, who obeyed God and exalted the whole Creation in his rising. Behold the man, Adam as he was meant to be. Behold the New Adam who is even now transforming the Old Adam's failure into glory!*

Behold the man! Behold the first-born of the dead. Behold, as in the icon of the Resurrection, the man who descends to reach Adam and Eve and raise them up in his ascent. Behold the man who will enter the realm of the dead and forever crush death's power to keep people down.



An icon of the Resurrection.

Behold the man and behold the firstborn of many brothers! You may know the great chapter on faith, chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, and it is with good reason one of the most-loved chapters in the Bible, but it is not the only thing in Hebrews. The book of Hebrews looks at things people were caught up in, from the glory of angels to sacrifices and the Mosaic Law, and underscores how much more the Son excels above them. A little before the passage we read above, we see, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'?" (Hebrews 1:5) And yet in John's prologue we read, "To those who received him and believed in his name, he gave the authority to become the children of God." (John 1:9) We also read today, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I have made your enemies a footstool under your feet?'" (Hebrews 1:13) And yet Paul encourages us: "The God of

peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet," (Romans 16:20) and elsewhere asks bickering Christians, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (I Corinthians 6:3) *Behold the man! Behold the firstborn of many brothers, the Son of God who became a man so that men might become the Sons of God. Behold the One who became what we are that we might by grace become what he is. Behold the supreme exemplar of what it means to be Christian.*

Behold the man and behold the first-born of all Creation, through whom and by whom all things were made! Behold the Uncreated Son of God who has entered the Creation and forever transformed what it means to be a creature! Behold the Saviour of the whole Creation, the Victor who will return to Heaven bearing as trophies not merely his transfigured saints but the whole Creation! Behold the One by whom and through whom all things were created! Behold the man!

Pontius Pilate spoke words that were deeper than he could have **possibly** imagined. And Christ continued walking the fateful journey before him, continued walking to the place of the Skull, Golgotha, and finally struggled to breathe, his arms stretched out as far as love would go, and barely gasped out, "It is finished."

Then and there, the entire work of Creation, which we read about from Genesis onwards, was *complete*. There and no other place the world was created, at 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD. *Then* the world was created.

I wince at the idea that for theologians "boundary issues" are mostly about demonstrating the compatibility of timeless revealed truths to the day's state of flux in scientific speculation. I wince that theologians so often assume that the biggest contribution they can give to the dialogue between theology and science is the rubber stamp of perennially agreeing with science. I would decisively prefer that when theologians "approach religion and science boundary issues," we do so as boundaries are understood in pop psychology—and more specifically *bad* pop psychology—which is all about you cannot meaningfully say "Yes" until it is your practice to say "No" when you should say "No": what theology needs in its

boundaries with science is not primarily a question of what else we should seek to embrace, but of where theology has ingested things toxic to its constitution.

What gets lost when theology loses track (by which I do not mean primarily rumor science, but the three columns where theology seemed a colony of science that had lost touch with Orthodox faith) is that when theology assumes the character of science, it loses the character of theology.

The research for my diploma thesis at Cambridge had me read a lot of historical-critical commentary on a relevant passage; I read everything I could find on the topic in Tyndale House's specialized library, and something became painfully obvious. When a good Protestant sermon uses historical or cultural context to illuminate a passage from Scripture, the preacher has sifted through pearls amidst sand, and the impression that cultural context offers a motherlode of gold to enrich our understanding of the Bible is quite contrary to the historical-critical commentaries I read, which read almost like phone books in their records of details I'd have to stretch to use to illuminate the passage. The pastor's discussion of context in a sermon is something like an archivist who goes into a scholar's office, pulls an unexpected book, shows that it is surprisingly careworn and dog-eared, and discusses how the three longest underlined passage illuminate the scholar's output. But the historical-critical commentary itself is like an archivist who describes in excruciating detail the furniture and ornaments in the author's office and the statistics about the size and weight among books the scholar owned in reams of (largely uninterpreted) detail.

And what is lost in this careful scholarship? Perhaps what is lost is why we have Bible scholarship in the first place: it is a divinely given book and a support to life in Christ. If historical-critical scholarship is your (quasi-scientific) approach to theology, you won't seek in your scholarship what I sought in writing my (non-scientific) [Doxology](#):

How shall I praise thee, O Lord?
For naught that I might say,
Nor aught that I may do,

Compareth to thy worth.

Thou art the Father for whom every fatherhood in Heaven and on earth is named,

The Glory for whom all glory is named,

The Treasure for whom treasures are named,

The Light for whom all light is named,

The Love for whom all love is named,

The Eternal by whom all may glimpse eternity,

The Being by whom all beings exist,

יהוה,

Ο ΩΝ.

The King of Kings and Lord of Lords,

Who art eternally praised,

Who art all that thou canst be,

Greater than aught else that may be thought,

Greater than can be thought.

In thee is light,

In thee is honour,

In thee is mercy,

In thee is wisdom, and praise, and every good thing.

For good itself is named after thee,

God immeasurable, immortal, eternal, ever glorious, and humble.

What mighteth compare to thee?

What praise equalleth thee?

If I be fearfully and wonderfully made,

Only can it be,

Wherewith thou art fearful and wonderful,

And ten thousand things besides,

Thou who art One,

Eternally beyond time,

So wholly One,

That thou mayest be called infinite,

Timeless beyond time thou art,

The One who is greater than infinity art thou.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

The Three who are One,

No more bound by numbers than by word,

And yet the Son is called Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ,
The Word,
Divine ordering Reason,
Eternal Light and Cosmic Word,
Way pre-eminent of all things,
Beyond all, and infinitesimally close,
Thou transcendest transcendence itself,
The Creator entered into his Creation,
Sharing with us humble glory,
Lowered by love,
Raised to the highest,
The Suffering Servant known,
The King of Glory,
Ο ΩΝ.

What tongue mighteth sing of thee?
What noetic heart mighteth know thee,
With the knowledge that drinketh,
The drinking that knoweth,
Of the νοϋς,
The loving, enlightened spiritual eye,
By which we may share the knowing,
Of divinised men joining rank on rank of angel.

Thou art,
The Hidden Transcendent God who transcendest transcendence
itself,
The One God who transfigurest Creation,
The Son of God became a Man that men might become the sons of
God,
The divine became man that man mighteth become divine.

Monty Python and Christian theology

I would like to start winding down with a less uplifting note. A few years back, I visited a friend who was a Christian and a big Monty Python fan and played for me a Monty Python clip:

God: Arthur! Arthur, King of the Britons! Oh, don't grovel! If there's one thing I can't stand, it's people groveling.

Arthur: Sorry—

God: And don't apologize. Every time I try to talk to someone it's 'sorry this' and 'forgive me that' and 'I'm not worthy'. What are you doing now!?

Arthur: I'm averting my eyes, O Lord.

God: Well, don't. It's like those miserable Psalms—they're so depressing. Now knock it off!

This is blasphemous, and I tried to keep my mouth shut about what my host had presented to me, I thought, for my rollicking laughter. But subsequent conversation showed I had misjudged his intent: he had not intended it to be shockingly funny.

He had, in fact, played the clip because it was something that he worried about: did God, in fact, want to give grumbling complaints about moments when my friend cried out to him in prayer? Does prayer annoy our Lord as an unwelcome intrusion from people who should have a little dignity and leave him alone or at least quit sniveling?

This is much more disturbing than merely playing the clip because you find it funny to imagine God bitterly kvetching when King Arthur tries to show him some respect. If it is actually taken as theology, Monty Python is really sad.

And it is not the best thing to be involved in Monty Python as theology

theology.

One can whimsically imagine an interlocutor encountering some of the theology I have seen and trying to generously receive it in the best of humor: "A book that promises scientific theology in its title and goes on for a thousand pages of trajectories for other people to follow before a conclusion that apologizes for not actually getting on to any theology? *You have a real sense of humor!* Try to avoid imposing Christianity on others and start from the common ground of what all traditions across the world have in common, that non-sectarian common ground being the Western tradition of analytic philosophy? *Roaringly funny!* Run a theological anthropology course that tells how liberationists, feminists, queer theorists, post-colonialists, and so on have to say to the Christian tradition and does not begin to investigate what the Christian tradition has to say to them? *You should have been a comedian!* Yoke St. Gregory of Nyssa together with a lesbian deconstructionist like Judith Butler to advance the feminist agenda of gender fluidity? *You're really giving Monty Python a run for their money!*" ... until it gradually dawns on our interlocutor that the lewd discussion of sexual theology is not in any sense meant as an attempt to eclipse Monty Python. (Would our interlocutor spend the night weeping for lost sheep without a shepherd?)

There are many more benign examples of academic theology; many of even the problems may be slightly less striking. But theology that gives the impression that it could be from Monty Python is a bit of a dead (coal miner's) canary.

Scientific theology does not appear to be blame for all of these, but it is not irrelevant. Problems that are not directly tied to (oxymoronic) scientific theology are usually a complication of (oxymoronic) secular theology, and scientific theology and secular theology are deeply enough intertwined.

The question of evolution is important, and it is no error that a figure like Philip Johnson gives neo-Darwinian evolution pride of place in assessing materialist attacks on religion. But it is not an adequate remedy to merely study intelligent design. Not enough by half.

If theology could, like bad pop psychology, conceive of its "boundary issues" not just in terms of saying "Yes" but of learning to stop saying "Yes" when it should say "No", this would be a great gain. So far as I have seen, the questions about boundaries with science are primarily not scientific ideas theology needs to assimilate, but ways theology has assimilated some very deep characteristics of science that are *not* to its advantage. The question is less about what more could be added, than what more could be taken away. And the best way to do this is less the Western cottage industry of worldview construction than a journey of repentance such as one still finds preached in Eastern Christianity and a good deal of Christianity in the West.

A journey of repentance

Repentance is Heaven's best-kept secret. Repentance has been called unconditional surrender, and it has been called the ultimate experience to fear. But when you surrender what you thought was your ornament and joy, you realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!" And with letting go comes hands that are free to grasp joy you never thought to ask. Forgiveness is letting go of the other person and finding it is yourself you have set free; repentance is being terrified of letting go and then finding you have let go of needless pain. Repentance is indeed Heaven's best-kept secret; it opens doors.

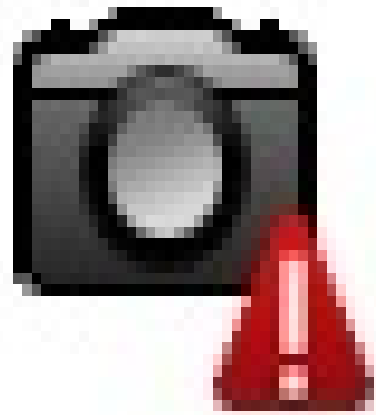
I have doubt whether academic theology will open the door of repentance; it is a beginner's error to be the student who rushes in to single-handedly sort out what a number of devout Christian theologians see no way to fix. But as for theologians, the door of repentance is ever ready to open, and with it everything that the discipline of theology seeks in vain here using theories from the humanities, there trying to mediate prestige to itself science. Academic theologians who are, or who become, theologians in a more ancient sense find tremendous doors of beauty and joy open to them. The wondrous poetry of St. Ephrem the Syrian is ever open; the liturgy of the Church is open; the deifying rays of divine grace shine ever down upon those open to receiving them and upon those not yet open. The Western understanding is that the door to the Middle Ages has long since been closed and the age of the Church Fathers was closed much earlier; but Orthodox will let you become a Church Father, here now. Faithful people today submit as best they are able to the Fathers before them, as St. Maximus Confessor did ages ago. There may be problems with academic theology today, but the door to theology in the classic sense is never closed, as in the maxim that has rumbled through the ages, "A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian." Perhaps academic theology is not the best place to be equipped to be a giant like the saintly theologians of ages past. But that does not mean that one cannot become a saintly theologian as in ages past. God can still work with us, here now.

To quote St. Dionysius (pseudo-Dionysius) in [The Mystical Theology](#),

Trinity! Higher than any being,
any divinity, any goodness!
Guide of Christians
in the wisdom of Heaven!
Lead us up beyond unknowing light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,
where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
Amid the deepest shadow
They pour overwhelming light
on what is most manifest.
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
They completely fill our sightless minds
with treasures beyond all beauty.

Let us ever seek the theology of living faith!

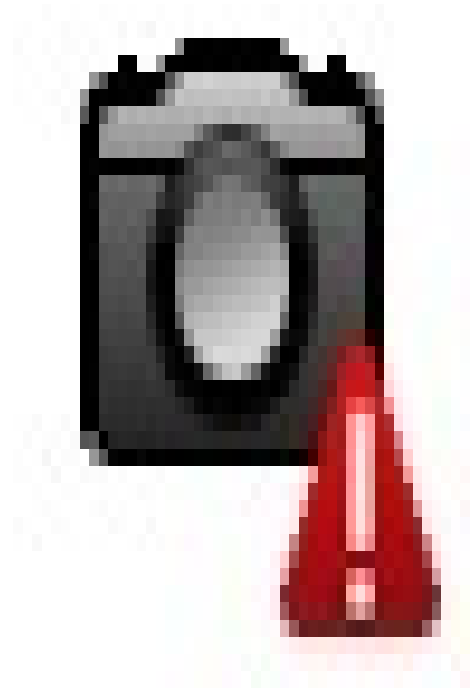
An Open Letter to Catholics on Orthodoxy and Ecumenism



**A Roman Catholic
take on an authentic
Byzantine style icon—
complete with not just
stigmata but the
Sacred Heart of Jesus.**

**The effect on an
Orthodox is like the
following**

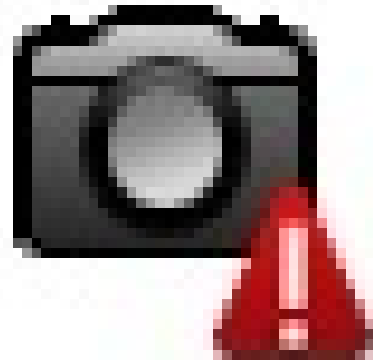
OrthodoxCircle post:



This last icon was made by a fully Orthodox Christian in good standing, who posted it as "A little joke)))" and repented and apologized when other Orthodox explained to her that this was tasteless and inappropriate.

To my knowledge, examples like the first two above abound, and Roman Catholics seem not, like this faithful

Orthodox woman, to acknowledge that what they had done was inappropriate and tasteless, and apologize and humbly repent and return to walking the Orthodox way.



A shirt proudly worn by some Catholics, claiming the wearer to be an "Orthodox Christian in Communion with Rome." I've wished to make a shirt that said, "Catholic Christian in Communion with the Archdruid of Canterbury".

There is an elephant in the room.
But Catholics are very

**skilled at NOT seeing
it.**

What might be called "the Orthodox question"

I expect ecumenical outreach to Orthodox has been quite a trying experience for Catholics. It must seem to Catholics like they have made Orthodoxy their top ecumenical priority, and after they have done their best and bent over backwards, many Orthodox have shrugged and said, "That makes one of us!" or else made a nastier response. And I wonder if Catholics have felt a twinge of the Lord's frustration in saying, "All day long I have held out my hands to a rebellious and stubborn people." (Rom 10:21)

In my experience, most Catholic priests have been hospitable: warm to the point of being warmer to me than my own priests. It almost seems as if the recipe for handling Orthodox is to express a great deal of warmth and warmly express hope for Catholics and Orthodox to be united. And that, in a nutshell, is how Catholics seem to conceive what might be called "the Orthodox question."

And I'm afraid I have something painful to say. Catholics think Orthodox are basically the same, and that they understand us. And I'm asking you to take a tough pill to swallow: Catholics do not understand Orthodox. You think you do, but you don't.

I'd like to talk about an elephant in the room. This elephant, however painfully obvious to Orthodox, seems something Catholics are strikingly oblivious to.

A conciliatory gesture (or so I was told)

All the Orthodox I know were puzzled for instance, that the Pope thought it conciliatory to retain titles such as "Vicar of Jesus Christ," "Successor of the Prince of the Apostles," and "Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church," but drop "Patriarch of the West." Orthodox complain that the Roman bishop "was given primacy but demanded supremacy," and the title "Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church" is offensive. Every bishop is the successor of the prince of the apostles, so reserving that title to the Pope is out of line. But Orthodoxy in both ancient and modern times regards the Pope as the Patriarch of Rome, and the Orthodox Church, having His Holiness IGNATIUS the Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, has good reason to call the Patriarch of Rome, "the Patriarch of the West." The response I heard to His Holiness Benedict dropping that one title while retaining the others, ranged from "Huh?" to, "Hello? Do you understand us at *all*?"

What Catholics never acknowledge

That is not a point I wish to belabor; it is a relatively minor example next to how, when in my experience Catholics have warmly asked Orthodox to reunify, never once have I seen any recognition or manifest awareness of the foremost concern Orthodox have about Rome and Constantinople being united. Never once have I seen mere acknowledgment of the Orthodox concern about what Rome most needs to repent of.

Let me clarify that slightly. I've heard Catholics acknowledge that Catholics have committed atrocities against Orthodox in the past, and Catholics may express regrets over wrongs from ages past and chide Orthodox for a lack of love in not being reunified. But when I say, "what Rome most needs to repent of," I am not taking the historian's view. I'm not talking about sack of the Constantinople, although people more Orthodox than me may insist on things like that. I am not talking about what Rome has done in the past to repent of, but what is continuing now. I am talking about the present tense, and in the present tense. When Catholics come to me and honor Orthodoxy with deep warmth and respect and express a desire for reunion, what I have never once heard mention of is the recantation of Western heresy.

This may be another tough pill to swallow. Catholics may know that Orthodox consider Catholics to be heretics, but this never enters the discussion when Catholics are being warm and trying to welcome Orthodox into their embrace. It's never acknowledged or addressed. The warm embrace instead affirms that we have a common faith, a common theology, a common tradition: we are the same, or so Orthodox are told, in all essentials. If Orthodox have not restored communion, we are told that we do not recognize that we have all the doctrinal agreement properly needed for reunification.

But don't we agree on major things? Rome's bishops say we do!

I would like to outline three areas of difference and give some flesh to the Orthodox claim that there are unresolved differences. I would like to outline one issue about what is theology, and then move on to social ethics, and close on ecumenism itself. I will somewhat artificially limit myself to three; some people more Orthodox than me may wonder why, for instance, I don't discuss the filioque clause (answer: I am not yet Orthodox enough to appreciate the importance given by my spiritual betters, even if I do trust that they are my spiritual betters). But there's a lot in these three.

To Catholics who insist that we share a common faith, I wish to ask a question that may sound flippant or even abrasive. A common faith? *Really?* Are you ready to de-canonize Thomas Aquinas and repudiate his scholasticism? Because Orthodox faith is something incompatible with the "theology" of Thomas Aquinas, and if you don't understand this, you're missing something fundamental to Orthodox understandings of theology. And if you're wondering why I used quotes around "theology," let me explain. Or, perhaps better, let me give an example.

See the two texts below. One is chapter 5 in St. Dionysius (or, if you prefer, pseudo-Dionysius), *The Mystical Theology*. That gem is on the left. To the right is a partial rewriting of the ideas in the style of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*.

St. Dionysius the Areopagite, "The Mystical Theology"

Rewritten in the scholastic style of Thomas Aquinas

Again, as we climb higher
we say this. It is not soul or
mind, nor does it possess
imagination, conviction, speech,
or understanding. Nor is it

speech *per se*, understanding *per se*. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by

understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense that we understand the term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond every assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its

Question Five: Whether God may accurately be described with words and concepts.

Objection One: It appears that God may be accurately described, for otherwise he could not be described as existing. For we read, *I AM WHO AM*, and if God cannot be described as existing, then assuredly nothing else can. But we know that things exist, therefore God may be accurately described as existing.

Objection Two: It would seem that God may be described with predicates, for Scripture calls him Father, Son, King, Wisdom, etc.

Objection Three: It appears that either affirmations or negations must accurately describe God, for between an affirmation and its negation, exactly one of them must be true.

On the Contrary, I reply that every affirmation and negation is finite, and in the end inadequate beyond measure, incapable of containing or of circumscribing God.

We should remember that the ancients described God in imperfect terms rather than say nothing about him at all...

preeminently simple and
absolute nature, it is also
beyond every denial.

Lost in translation?

There is something lost in "translation" here. What exactly is lost? Remember Robert Frost's words, "Nothing of poetry is lost in translation except for the poetry." There is a famous, ancient maxim in the Orthodox Church's treasured [Philokalia](#) saying, "A theologian is one who prays truly, and one who prays truly is a theologian:" theology is an invitation to prayer. And the original *Mystical Theology* as rendered on the left is exactly that: an invitation to prayer, while the rewrite in the style of the *Summa Theologiæ* has been castrated: it is only an invitation to analysis and an impressively deft solution to a logic puzzle. The ideas are all preserved: nothing of the theology is lost in translation except for the theology. And this is part of why Archimandrite Vasileos, steeped in the nourishing, prayerful theology of the Orthodox Church, bluntly writes in [Hymn of Entry](#) that scholastic theology is "an indigestible stone."

Thomas Aquinas drew on Greek Fathers and in particular St. John the Damascene. He gathered some of the richest theology of the East and turned it into something that is not theology to Orthodox: nothing of the Greek theology was lost in the scholastic translation but the theology! And there is more amiss in that Thomas Aquinas also drew on "the Philosopher," Aristotle, and all the materialistic seeds in Aristotelianism. (The Greeks never lost Aristotle, but they also never made such a big deal about him, and to be called an Aristotelian could be a strike against you.) There is a spooky hint of the "methodological agnosticism" of today's academic theology—the insistence that maybe you have religious beliefs, but you need to push them aside, at least for the moment, to write serious theology. The seed of secular academic "theology" is already present in how Thomas Aquinas transformed the Fathers.

This is a basic issue with far-reaching implications.

Am I *seriously* suggesting that Rome de-canonize Thomas Aquinas? Not exactly. I am trying to point out what level of repentance and recantation would be called for in order that full communion would be appropriate. I am not seriously asking that Rome de-canonize Thomas

Aquinas. I *am* suggesting, though, that Rome begin to recognize that nastier and deeper cuts than this would be needed for full communion between Rome and Orthodoxy. And I know that it is not pleasant to think of rejoining the Orthodox Church as (*shudder*) a reconciled heretic. I know it's not pleasant. I am, by the grace of God, a reconciled heretic myself, and I recanted Western heresy myself. It's a humbling position, and if it's too big a step for you to take, it is something to at least *recognize* that it's a big step to take, and one that Rome has not yet taken.

The Saint and the Activist

Let me describe two very different images of what life is for. The one I will call "the saint" is that, quite simply, life is for the contemplation of God, and the means to contemplation is largely asceticism: the concrete practices of a life of faith. The other one, which I will call, "the activist," is living to change the world as a secular ideology would understand changing the world. In practice the "saint" and the "activist" may be the ends of a spectrum rather than a rigid dichotomy, but I wish at least to distinguish the two, and make some remarks about modern Catholic social teaching.

Modern Catholic social teaching could be enlightened. It could be well meant. It could be humane. It could be carefully thought out. It could be a recipe for a better society. It could be providential. It could be something we should learn from, or something we need. It could be any number of things, but what it absolutely is *not* is theology. It is absolutely not spiritually nourishing theology. If, to Orthodox, scholastic theology like that of Thomas Aquinas is as indigestible as a stone, modern Catholic social teaching takes indigestibility to a whole new level—like indigestible shards of broken glass.

The 2005 [Deus Caritas Est](#) names the *Song of Songs* three times, and that is without precedent in the Catholic social encyclicals from the 1891 [Rerum Novarum](#) on. Look for references to the *Song of Songs* in their footnotes—I don't think you'll find any, or at least I didn't. This is a symptom of a real problem, a lack of the kind of theology that would think of things like the *Song of Songs*—which is highly significant. The *Song of Songs* is a favorite in mystical theology, the prayerful theology that flows from faith, and mystical theology is not easily found in the social encyclicals. I am aware of the friction when secular academics assume that Catholic social teaching is one more political ideology to be changed at will. I give some benefit of the doubt to Catholics who insist that there are important differences, even if I'm skeptical over whether the differences are *quite* so big as they are made out to be. But without insisting that Catholic social teaching is *just* another activist ideology, I

will say that it is anything but a pure "saint" model, and it mixes in the secular "activist" model to a degree that is utterly unlawful to Orthodox.

Arius is more scathingly condemned in Orthodox liturgy than even Judas. And, contrary to current fashion, I really do believe Arius and Arianism are as bad as the Fathers say. But Arius never dreamed either of reasoning out systematic theology or of establishing social justice. His *Thalia* are a (perhaps very bad) invitation to worship, not a systematic theology or a plan for social justice. In those regards, Catholic theology not only does not reach the standard of the old Orthodox giants: it does not even reach the standard of the old arch-heretics!

Catholics today celebrate Orthodoxy and almost everything they know about us save that we are not in full communion. Catholic priests encourage icons, or reading the Greek fathers, or the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." But what Catholics may not always be mindful of is that they celebrate Orthodoxy and put it alongside things that are utterly anathema to Orthodox: like heartily endorsing the Orthodox Divine Liturgy and placing it alongside the Roman mass, Protestant services, Unitarian meetings, Hindu worship, and the spiritualist *séance* as all amply embraced by Rome's enfolding bosom.

What we today call "ecumenism" is at its root a Protestant phenomenon. It stems from how Protestants sought to honor Christ's prayer that we may all be one, when they took it as non-negotiable that they were part of various Protestant denominations which remained out of communion with Rome. The Catholic insistence that each Protestant who returns to Rome heals part of the Western schism is a nonstarter for this "ecumenism:" this "ecumenism" knows we need unity but takes schism as non-negotiable: which is to say that this "ecumenism" rejects the understanding of Orthodox, some Catholics, and even the first Protestants that full communion is full communion and what Christ prayed for was a full communion that assumed doctrinal unity.

One more thing that is very important to many Orthodox, and that I have never once heard acknowledged or even mentioned by the Catholics reaching so hard for ecumenical embrace is that many Orthodox are

uneasy at best with ecumenism. It has been my own experience that the more devout and more mature Orthodox are, the more certainly they regard ecumenism as a spiritual poison. Some of the more conservative speak of "ecumenism awareness" as Americans involved in the war on drugs speak of "drug awareness."

Catholics can be a lot like Orthodox in their responses to Protestants and Protestant ideas of ecumenism; one might see a Catholic responding to an invitation to join an ecumenical communion service at First Baptist by saying something like,

I'm flattered by your ecumenical outreach... And really am, um, uh, *honored* that you see me as basically the same as an Evangelical... And I really appreciate that I am as welcome to join you in receiving communion as your very own flock... Really, I'm flattered...

...But full communion is full communion, and it reflects fundamental confusion to put the cart before the horse. For us to act otherwise would be a travesty. I know that you may be generously overlooking our differences, but even if it means being *less* generous, we need to give proper attention to our unresolved differences before anything approaching full communion would be appropriate.

But Catholics seem to be a bit like Protestants in their ecumenical advances to Orthodox. If I understand correctly, whereas Rome used to tell Orthodox, "You would be welcome to take communion with us, but we would rather you obey your bishops," now I am told by Rome that I may remain Orthodox while receiving Roman communion, and my reply is,

I'm flattered by your ecumenical outreach... And really am, um, uh, *honored* that you see me as basically the same as any Catholic... And I really appreciate that I am as welcome to join you in receiving communion as your very own flock... Really, I'm flattered...

...But full communion is full communion, and it reflects fundamental confusion to put the cart before the horse. For us to act

otherwise would be a travesty. I know that you may be generously overlooking our differences, but even if it means being *less* generous, we need to give proper attention to our unresolved differences before anything approaching full communion would be appropriate.

If the Roman Church is almost Orthodox in its dealings with Protestants, it in turn seems almost Protestant in its dealings with Orthodox. It may be that Rome looks at Orthodoxy and sees things that are almost entirely permitted in the Roman Church: almost every point of theology or spirituality that is *the only way to do things* in Orthodoxy is at least *a permitted option* to Roman Catholics. (So Rome looks at Orthodoxy, or at least some Romans do, and see Orthodox as something that can be allowed to be a full-fledged part of the Roman communion: almost as Protestants interested in ecumenism look at the Roman Church as being every bit as much a full-fledged Christian denomination as the best of Protestant groups.) But the reverse of this phenomenon is *not* true: that is, Orthodox do not look at Rome and say, "Everything that you require or allow in spiritual theology is also allowed in healthy Eastern Orthodoxy." Furthermore, I have never seen awareness or sensitivity to those of Orthodox who do not consider ecumenism, at least between traditional communions, to be a self-evidently good thing to work for: Catholics can't conceive of a good reason for why Orthodox would not share their puppyish enthusiasm for ecumenism. And I have never heard a Catholic who expressed a desire for the restoration for full communion show any perception or willingness to work for the Orthodox concerns about what needs to feed into any *appropriate* restoration of communion, namely the recantation of Western heresy represented by figures like Thomas Aquinas and not only by [Mater et Magistra](#) or liberal Catholic dissent.

Conclusion: are we at the eve of an explosion?

I may have mentioned several elephants in the room. Let me close by mentioning one more that many Orthodox are painfully aware of, even if Catholics are oblivious.

Orthodoxy may remind Western Christians of Rome's ancient origins. But there is an important way in which I would compare Orthodoxy today to Western Christianity on the eve of the Reformation. Things hadn't exploded. Yet. But there were serious problems and trouble brewing, and I'm not sure it's that clear to people how much trouble is brewing.

Your ecumenical advances and efforts to draw us closer to Rome's enfolding bosom come at a rough and delicate time:

What if, while there was serious trouble but not yet schisms spreading like wildfire, the East had reached out to their estranged Western brethren and said:

Good news! You really don't need scholasticism... And you don't exactly need transubstantiation either... And you don't need anywhere such a top-down Church heirarchy... And you really don't need to be in communion with the Patriarch of Rome... And...

There is a profound schism brewing in the Orthodox Church. It may not be within your power to stop it, but it may be within your power to avoid giving it an early start, and it may be within your power to avoid making the wreckage even worse.

The best thing I can think of to say is simply, "God have mercy on us all."

Cordially yours,
[Christos Jonathan Seth Hayward](#)
The Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt; Lent, 2009.

Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature: Anatomy of a Passion

It's exotic, right?

The website for the Ubuntu Linux distribution announced that Ubuntu is "an ancient African word" meaning humanity to others. It announced how it carried forward the torch of a Linux distribution that's designed for regular people to use. And this promotion of "an ancient African word" has bothered a few people: [one South African blogger](#) tried to explain several things: for instance, he mentioned that "ubuntu" had been a quite ordinary Xhosa/Zulu word meaning "humanity," mentioned that it had been made into a political rallying cry in the 20th century, and drew an analogy: saying, "'Ubuntu' is an ancient African word meaning 'humanity'" is as silly as saying, in reverential tones, "'People' is an ancient European word meaning, 'more than one person.'" There is an alternative definition provided in the forums of Gentoo, a technical aficionado's Linux distribution: "Ubuntu. An African word meaning, 'Gentoo is too hard for me.'"

The blogger raised questions of gaffe in the name of the distribution; he did not raise questions about the Linux distribution itself, nor would I. Ubuntu is an excellent Linux distribution for nontechnical users, it gets some things very much right, and I prefer it to most other forms of Linux

I've seen—including Gentoo. I wouldn't bash the distribution, nor would I think of bashing what people mean by making "ubuntu" a rallying-cry in pursuing, in their words, "Linux for human beings."

The offense lay in something else, and it is something that, in American culture at least, runs deep: it was a crass invocation of an Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom. It is considered an impressive beginning to a speech to open by recounting an Archetypal Exotic Culture's Awesome Nugget of Profound Wisdom: whether one is advertising a Linux distribution, a neighbor giving advice over a fence in *Home Improvement*, or a politician delivering a speech, it is taken as a mark of sophistication and depth to build upon the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom.

At times I've had a sneaking suspicion that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Awesome Nugget of Profound Wisdom is the mouthpiece for whatever is fashionable in the West at the time. Let me give one illustration, if one that veers a bit close to the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom:

One American friend of mine, when in Kenya, gave a saying that was not from any of the people groups she was interacting with, but was from a relatively close neighboring people group: "When you are carrying a child in your womb, he only belongs to you. When he is born, he belongs to everyone." The proverb speaks out of an assumption that not only parents but parents' friends, neighbors, elders, shopkeepers, and ultimately all adults, stand *in parentis loco*. All adults are ultimately responsible for all children and are responsible for exercising a personal and parental care to help children grow into mature adulthood. As best I understand, this is probably what a particular community in Africa might mean in saying, "It takes a village to raise a child."

What is a little strange is that, if these words correspond to anything in the U.S., they are conservative, and speak to a conservative desire to believe that not only parents but neighbors, churches, civic and local organizations, businesses and the like, all owe something to the moral upbringing of children: that is to say, there are a great many forces outside the government that owe something to local children. And this is

quite the opposite of saying that we need more government programs because it takes a full complement of government initiatives and programs to raise a child well—because, presumably, more and more bureaucratic initiatives are what the (presumably generic) African sages had in mind when they gave the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom and said, "It takes a village to raise a child." There is some degree of irony in making "It takes a village" a rallying-cry in pushing society *further away* from what, "It takes a village to raise a child," *could* have originally meant—looking for advice on how to build a statist Western-style cohort of bureaucratic government programs would be as inconceivable in many traditional African cultures as looking for instructions on how to build a computer in the New Testament.

My point in mentioning this is not *primarily* sensitivity to people who don't like hearing people spout about a supposedly "ancient African word" such as, "Ubuntu." Nor is my point really about how, whenever a saying is introduced as an ancient aboriginal proverb, the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom ends up shanghied into being an eloquent statement of whatever fads are blowing around in the West today. My deepest concern is that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom hinges on something that is bad for us spiritually.

The Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is tied to what the Orthodox Church refers to as a "passion," which means something very different from either being passionately in love, or being passionate about a cause or a hobby, or even religious understandings of the passion of Christ. The concept of a passion is a religious concept of a spiritual disease that one feeds by thoughts and actions that are out of step with reality. There is something like the concept of a passion in the idea of an addiction, a bad habit, or in other Christians whose idea of sin is mostly about spiritual state rather than mere actions. A passion is a spiritual disease that we feed by our sins, and the concern I raise about the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is one way—out of many ways we have—that we feed one specific passion.

The Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is occult, and we cannot give the same authority to any source that is here

and now. If we listen to the wise voices of elders, it is only elders from faroff lands who can give such deeply relevant words: I have never heard such a revered Nugget of Wisdom come from the older generation of our own people, or any of the elders we meet day to day.

By "occult" I mean something more than an Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom that might note that the word "occult" etymologically signifies "hidden"—and still does, in technical medical usage—and that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom has been dug up from someplace obscure and hidden. Nor is it really my point that the Nugget may be dug up from an occult source—as when I heard an old man, speaking with a majestic voice, give a homily for the (Christmas) Festival of Lessons and Carols that begun by building on a point from a famous medieval Kabbalist. These are at best tangentially related. What I mean by calling the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom occult is that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is the fruit of the same tree as explicitly occult practices—and they are tributaries feeding the same river.

Occult sin is born out of a sense that the way things are in the here and now that God has placed us in are not enough: Gnosticism has been said to hinge, not so much on a doctrine, but something like a mood, a mood of despair. (You might say a passion of despair.) Gnostic Scripture is a sort of spiritual porn that offers a dazzling escape from the present—a temptation whose power is much stronger on people yearning for such escape than for people who have learned the virtuous inoculation of contentment.

It takes virtue to enjoy even vice, and that includes contentment. As a recovering alcoholic will tell you, being drunk all the time is misery, and, ultimately, you have to be at least somewhat sober even to enjoy getting drunk. It takes humility to enjoy even pride, and chastity to enjoy even lust. Contentment does not help us escape—it helps us find joy where we were not looking for it, precisely in what we were trying to escape. We do not find a way out of the world—what we find is really and truly a way into where God has placed us.

One can almost imagine a dialogue between God and Adam:

Adam: I'm not content.

God: What do you want me to do?

Adam: I want you to make me contented.

God: Ok, how do you want me to do that?

Adam: First of all, I don't want to have to engage in ardent, strenuous labor like most people. I don't want to do that kind of work at all.

God: Ok.

Adam: And that's not all. I want to have enough bread to feel full.

God: Ok.

Adam: Scratch that. I want as much *meat* as I want.

God: Ok, as much meat as you want.

Adam: And sweet stuff like ice cream.

God: Ok, I'll give you Splenda ice cream so it won't show up on your waistline.

Adam: And I don't like to be subject to the weather and the elements you made. I want a home which will be cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

God: Sure. And I'll give you hot and cold running water, too!

Adam: Speaking of that, I don't like how my body smells—could we do something to hide that?

God: I'll let you bathe. Each day. In as much water as you want. And I'll give you deodorant to boot!

Adam: Oh, and by the way, I want to make my own surroundings—not just a home. I want electronics to put me in another world.

[*Now we're getting nowhere in a hurry!*]

This may be a questionable portrayal of God, but it *is* an accurate portrayal of the Adam who decided that being an immortal in paradise wasn't good enough for him.

Have all these things made us content?

Or have we used them to feed a passion?

We have a lot of ways of wishing that God had placed us someplace else, someplace different. One of the most interesting books I've glanced through, but not read, was covered in pink rosy foliage, and said that it was dealing with the #1 cause of unhappiness in women's relationships. And that #1 cause was a surprise: romantic fantasies. The point was that dreaming up a romantic fantasy and then trying to make it real is a recipe, not for fulfillment, but for heartbreaking disappointment *in circumstances where you could be truly happy*. (When you have your heart set on a fantasy of just how the perfect man will fulfill all your desires and transform your world, no *real* man can seem anything but a disappointing shadow next to your fantasy.)

This is not just a point about fantasies in romance. It is also a point that has something to do with technological wonders, secret societies, fascination with the paranormal, Star Trek, World of Warcraft, television, Dungeons and Dragons, sacramental shopping, SecondLife, conspiracy theories, smartphones, daydreams, Halloween, Harry Potter, Wicked, Wicca, The Golden Compass, special effects movies, alienated feminism, radical conservatism, Utopian dreams, political plans to transform the world, and every other way that we tell God, "Sorry, what you have given me is not good enough"—or what is much the same, wish God had given us something quite different.

Why, in my life, is _____ so difficult to me about _____? (I don't know; why has she forgiven every single one of the astonishingly stupid things I've done over the years?) Why can't I lose a couple of

stupid things I've done over the years.) Why can't I lose a couple of pounds when I want to? (I don't know; why do I have enough food that I wish I could lose pounds?) Why am I struggling with my debts? (I don't know; why do I have enough for now?) Why did I have to fight cancer? (I don't know; why am I alive and strong now?) Why does I stand to lose so much of what I've taken for granted? (I don't know. Why did I take them all for granted? And why did I have so many privileges growing up?) Why _____? (Why not? Why am I ungrateful and discontent with so many blessings?)

Contentment is a choice, and it has been made by people in much bleaker circumstances than mine.

I write this, not as one who has mightily fought this temptation to sin and remained pure, but as one who has embraced the sin wholeheartedly. I know the passion from the inside, and I know it well. Most of my cherished works on this site were written to be "interesting", and more specifically "interesting" as some sort of escape from a dreary here and now.

There is enough of this sin that, when I began to repent, I wondered if repenting would leave anything left in my writing. And after I had let go of that, I found that there was still something left to write. C.S. Lewis, in [The Great Divorce](#), alluded to the Sermon on the Mount (where Christ said that if our right hand or our right eye causes us to sin, we should rip it out and enter Heaven maimed rather than let our whole body be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur): Lewis said that the journey to Heaven may cost us our right hand and our right eye—but when we arrive in Heaven, we will find that what we have left behind is precisely *nothing*. Continuing to repent has meant changes for me, and it will (I hope) mean further changes. But I let go of writing only to find that I still had things to write. I gave up on trying to be "interesting" and make my own interesting private world and found, by the way, that God and his world are really *quite* interesting.

When we are repenting, or trying to, or trying not to, repentance is the ultimate terror. It seems unconditional surrender—and it is. But when we do repent, we realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell," and we realize that repentance is also a waking up, a coming to our senses, and a

coming to joy.

U I U I U I U I U I

What we don't want to hear

I would like to say a word on the politically incorrect term of "unnatural vice." Today there is an effort on some Christians to not distinguish that sharply between homosexuality and straight sexual sins. And it is always good practice to focus on one's own sins and their gravity, but there are very specific reasons to be concerned about unnatural vice. Let me draw an analogy.

It is a blinding flash of the obvious that a well-intentioned miscommunication can cause a conflict that is painful to all involved. And if miscommunications are not necessarily a sin, they can be painful enough, and not the sort of thing one wants to celebrate. However, there is a depth of difference between an innocent, if excruciatingly painful, miscommunication on the one hand, and the kind of conflict when someone deliberately gives betrayal under the guise of friendship. The Church Fathers had a place for a holy kiss as a salute among Christians, but in their mind the opposite of a holy kiss was not a kiss that was what we would understand "inappropriate," but when Judas said, "Master," saluted the Lord with a kiss, and by so doing betrayed him to be tortured to death. A painful miscommunication is bad enough, but a betrayal delivered under the guise of friendship is a problem with a higher pay grade.

Lust benefits no one, and it is not just the married who benefit from beating back roving desire, but the unmarried as well. But when Scripture and the Fathers speak of unnatural vice, they know something we've chosen to forget. And part of what we have forgotten is that "unnatural vice" is not just something that the gay rights movement advocates for. "Unnatural vice" includes several sins with higher pay grades, and one of them is witchcraft.

To people who have heard all the debates about whether, for instance, same-sex relationships might be unnatural for straight people but natural for gays, it may be a bit of culture shock to hear anything *besides* gay sex called "unnatural vice." But the term is there in the

Fathers, and it can mean other things. [It might include contraception.](#) And it definitely includes what we think of as a way to return to nature in witchcraft.

Adam reigned as an immortal king and lord over the whole world. He had a wife like nothing else in all Creation, paradise for a home, and harmony with nature such as we could not dream of. *And*, he was like a little boy with a whole room full of toys who is miserable because he wants another toy and his parents said "No." And lest we look down on Adam, we should remember that I am Adam, and you are Adam.

We have not lost all his glory, but we are crippled by his passion.

Adam wanted something beyond what he was given, something beyond his ken. An Orthodox hymn says, "Wanting to be a god, Adam failed to be god." More on that later. Adam experienced the desire that draws people to magic—even if the magic's apparent promise is a restored harmony with nature. This vice shattered the original harmony with nature, and brought a curse on not only Adam but nature itself. It corrupted nature. It introduced death. It means that many animals are terrified of us. It means that even the saints, the holiest of people, are the most aware of how much evil is in them—most of us are disfigured enough that we can think we don't have any *real* problem. There is tremendous good in the human person, too; that should be remembered. But even the saints are great sinners. All of this came through Adam's sin. How much more unnatural of a vice do you ask for than that?

Trying to restore past glory, and how it further estranges us from the past

When I was visiting a museum promising an exhibit on the Age of Reason, I was jarred to see ancient Greek/Roman/... items laid out in exhibits; what was being shown about the Enlightenment was the beginning of museums as we have them today. I was expecting to see coverage of a progressive age, and what I saw was a pioneering effort to reclaim past glory. Out of that jarring I realized something that historians might consider a blinding flash of the obvious. Let me explain the insight nonetheless, before tying it in with harmony with nature.

When people have tried to recover past glory, through the Western means of antiquarian reconstruction, the result severs continuity with the recent past and ultimately made a deeper schism from the more remote past as well.

The Renaissance was an attempt to recover the glory of classical antiquity, but the effect was not only to more or less end what there was in the Middle Ages, but help the West move away from some things that were common to the Middle Ages and antiquity alike. The Reformation might have accomplished many good things, but it did not succeed in its goal in resurrecting the ancient Church; it created a new way of being Christian. The Protestants I know are moral giants compared to much of what was going on in Rome in Luther's day, and they know Scripture far better, but Protestant Christianity is a decisive break from something that began in the Early Church and remained unbroken even in corrupt 16th century Rome. And it is not an accident that the Reformers dropped the traditional clerical clothing and wore instead the scholar's robes. (Understanding the Scripture was much less approached through reading the saints, much more by antiquarian scholarship.) The Enlightenment tried again to recover classical glory, and it was simultaneously a time, not of breaking with unbroken ways of being Christian, but of breaking with being Christian itself. Romanticism could add the Middle Ages to the list of past glorious ages, and it may well be that without the Romantics, we would not have great medievalists like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

But it was also something new. Every single time that I'm aware of that the West has tried to recover the glory of a bygone age, the effect has been a deeper rift with the past, both recent and ultimately ancient, leaving people much further alienated from the past than if they had continued without the reconstruction. I remember being astonished, not just to learn that two Vatican II watchwords were *ressourcement* (going back to ancient sources to restore past glory) and *aggiornamento* (bringing things up-to-date, which in practice meant bringing Rome in line with 1960's fads), nor that the two seemed to be two sides of the same coin, but that this was celebrated without anybody seeming to find something of a disturbing clue in this. The celebrations of these two watchwords seemed like a celebration of going to a hospital to have a doctor heal an old wound and inflict a new wound that is more fashionable.

The lesson would seem to be, "If you see a new way to connect with the past and recover past glory, be very careful. Consider it like you might consider a skilled opponent, in a game of chess, leaving a major piece vulnerable. It looks spiritually enticing, but it might be the bait for a spiritual trap, and if so, the consequences of springing for the bait might be a deeper rift with the past and its glory."

Not quite as shallow an approach to translate the past into the present...

Here is what you might do one day to live a bit more like prehistoric Grecians, or ancient Celts, or medieval Gallic peasants, or whatever. Keep in mind that this is at best half-way to its goal, not a full-fledged return to living like an ancient in harmony with nature to a day, but making a rough equivalent by using what is closest from our world:

1. However exotic the setting may seem to you, remember that it is a fundamental confusion to imagine that the setting was exotic *to those inside the experience*. We not only meet new people frequently; we see new technologies invented frequently. In The Historic Setting, people most likely were born, lived, and died within twenty miles, and even meeting another person who was not part of your village was rare. A new invention, or a new idea, would be difficult to imagine, let alone point to. So, for one day, whatever you're doing, if it feels exotic, avoid it like the plague. Stop it immediately. Don't read anything new; turn off your iPod; don't touch Wikipedia. Don't seek excitement; if anything, persevere in things you find boring.
2. Remembering that there was a lot of heavy manual labor, and stuff that was shared, spend your nice Saturday helping a friend move her stuff into her new apartment. Remember that while stairs were rare in antiquity, it would be an anachronism to take the elevator. Be a good manual laborer and do without the anachronism.
3. Remembering how the Sermon on the Mount betrays an assumption that most people were poor enough that houses would only have one room, spend your time at home, as much as possible, in one room of your house.
4. Remembering that the ancient world had no sense of "Jim's trying to lose weight and is on an old-fashioned low-fat diet, Mary's a vegan, Al's low carb...", but rather there was one diet that everybody day ate, go to McDonald's, order a meal with McDonald's McFries

McSoaked in McGrease, and a sugary-sweet, corn-syrup-powered shake.

If you just said to yourself, "He didn't say what size; I'll order the smallest I can," order the biggest meal you can.

5. Remembering that in the ancient world the company you kept were not your eclectic pick, spend time with the people around you. Go to your neighbor Ralph who blares bad '80s rock because he thinks it's the best thing in the world, and like a good guest don't criticize what your host has provided—including his music. Spend some time playing board games with your annoying kid sister, and then go over to visit your uncle Wally and pretend to tolerate his sexist jokes.
6. Lastly, when you head home do have a good night's sleep, remember that a bed with sheets covering a smooth mattress was only slightly more common than a Frank Lloyd Wright home is today, go to sleep on a straw pallet in your virtual one room house. (You can use organic straw if you can find any.)

This may seem, to put it politely, a way you would never have thought to live like an age in harmony with nature. But let me ask a perfectly serious question:

What *did* you expect? Did you imagine dressing up as a bard, dancing on hilltops, and reciting poetry about the endless knot while quaffing heather ale?

G.K. Chesterton said that there is more simplicity in eating caviar on impulse than eating granola on principle. In a similar fashion, there is more harmony with nature in instinctively pigging out at McDonald's than making a high and lonely spiritual practice out of knowing all the herbs in a meadow.

The vignette of harmony with nature as dancing on hilltops is an image of a scene where harmony with nature means fulfilling what we desire for ourselves. The image of hauling boxes to help a friend is a scene

where harmony with nature means *transcending* mere selfish desire. There is a common thread of faithfulness to unadvertised historical realities running through the six steps listed above. But there is another common thread:

Humility.

It chafes against a passion that people in ages past knew they needed to beat back.

Living according to nature in the past did not work without humility, and living in harmony with nature today did not work with humility.

There is a great deal of difference between getting help in living for yourself, and getting help in living for something more for yourself, and living for something more than yourself—such as people needed to survive in ancient communities close to nature—is the real treasure. It is spirituality with an ugly pair of work gloves, and it is a much bigger part of those communities that have been in harmony with nature than the superficially obvious candidates like spending more time outside and knowing when to plant different crops. If you clarify, "Actually, I was really more interested in the *spirituality* of a bygone age and its harmony with nature," you are missing something. Every one of those humbling activities is pregnant with spirituality—and is spiritual in a much deeper way than merely feeling the beauty of a ritual.

Perhaps we would be wise to remember the words of the Delphic Oracle, "Know thyself," which does not say what we might imagine today. Those words might have been paraphrased, "Know thy place, O overreaching mortal!"

And, in terms of humility, that has much more to give us than trying to reach down inside and make a sandcastle of an identity, and hope it won't be another sandcastle.

Should I really be patting myself on the back?

I try to follow a diet that is closer to many traditional diets, has less processing and organic ingredients when possible, and I believe for several reasons that I am right in doing so: medical, animal welfare, and environmental. But before I pat myself on the back too hard for showing the spirit of Orthodoxy in harmony with nature, I would be well advised to remember that there is far more precedent in the Fathers and in the saint's lives for choosing to live on a cup of raw lentils a week or a diet of rancid fish.

Saints may have followed something of a special diet, but that is because they believed and acted out of the conviction that they were unworthy of the good things of the world, including the common fare what most people ate. My diet, like other diets in fashion, is a diet that tells me that the common fare eaten by most people is simply unworthy of *me*. This may well enough be true—I have doubts about how much of today's industrially produced diet is fit for human consumption at all—and I may well enough answer, "But *of course* the Quarter Pounder with 'Cheese' eaten by an inner-city teen is unworthy of me—it's just as unworthy, if not more unworthy, of the inner-city teens who simply accept it as normal to eat." Even so, I have put myself in a difficult position. The saints thought they were unworthy of common fare. I believe that common fare is unworthy of me, and trying to believe that without deadly pride is trying to smoke, but not inhale.

In [the Book of James](#), the Lord's brother says that the poor should exult because of their high position while the rich should be humble because of their low position. The same wisdom might see that the person who eats anything that tastes good is the one in the high position, and the person who avoids most normal food out of a special diet's discrimination is in a position that is both low and precarious.

The glory of the Eucharist unfurls in a common meal around a table, and this "common" meal is common because it is shared. To pull back from "common" food is to lose something very Eucharistic about the meal and following one more discriminating diet like mine is a way to

meal, and following the more discriminating diet like mine is a way to
heals one breach of harmony with nature by opening up what may be a
deeper rift.

If evil is necessary, does it stop being evil?

Orthodoxy in the West inherits something like counterculture, and there is something amiss when Orthodox carry over unquestioned endeavors to build a counterculture or worldview or other such Western fads. If Orthodoxy *in the West* is countercultural, that doesn't mean that counterculture is something to seek out: if Orthodoxy is countercultural, that is a cost it pays. Civil disobedience *can* be the highest expression of a citizen's respect for law. Amputation *can* be the greatest expression of a physician's concern for a patient's life. However, these things are not basically good, and there is fundamental confusion in seeking out occasions to show such measures.

Another basis to try and learn from the past

To someone in the West, Orthodoxy may have a mighty antiquarian appeal. Orthodox saints, for the most part, speak from long ago and far away. However, this isn't the point; it's a side effect of a Church whose family of saints has been growing for millennia. Compare this, for instance, to a listing of great computer scientists—who will all be recent, not because computer science in an opposite fashion needs to be new, but because computer science hasn't been around nearly long enough for there to be a fourth century von Neumann or Knuth.

Some people wanting very hard knife blades—this may horrify an antiquarian—acquire nineteenth century metal files and grind them into knife blades. The reason for this is that metallurgists today simply do not know how to make steel as hard as the hardest Victorian-era metal files. The know-how is lost. And the hobbyists who seek a hard metal file as the starting point for their knife blades do not choose old metalwork because it is old; they choose old metal files because they are the hardest they can get. And there is something like this in the Orthodox Church. The point of a saint's life is not how exotic a time and place the saint is from; the point of a saint's life is holiness, a holiness that is something like a nineteenth century adamantine-hard metal file.

If there are problems in turning back the clock, the Orthodox Church has some very good news. This good news is not exactly a special way to turn back the clock; it is rather the good news that the clock can be lifted up.

There is a crucial difference between trying to restore the past, and hoping that it will lift you into Heaven, and being lifted up into Heaven and finding that a healthy connection with the past comes with it. The Divine Liturgy is a lifting up of the people and their lives up to Heaven: a life that begins here and now.

The hymn quoted earlier, "Adam, trying to be a god, failed to be god," continues, "Christ became man that he might make Adam god." The saying has rumbled down through the ages. "God (the Son of God)

became a Man (the Son of Man) that men (the sons of men) might become gods (the Sons of God)." The bad news, if it is bad news, is that we cannot escape a present into the beauty of Eden. The good news is that the present can itself be lifted up, that the doors to Eden remain open.

In some ways our search for happiness is like that of a grandfather who cannot find his glasses no matter how many places he looks—because they are right on his nose.

Men are not from Mars!

I was once able to visit a Mars Society conference—a conference from an organization whose purpose is to send human colonists to Mars.

To many of the people there, the question of whether we are "a spacefaring race" is much weightier than the question of whether medical research can find a cure for cancer. It's not just that a human colony on Mars would represent a first-class triumph of science and humanity; it is rather that the human race is beyond being a race of complete, unspeakable, and obscene *losers* if we don't come to our senses and colonize Mars so the human race is not just living on this earth and living the kind of life we live now. The question of whether we colonize Mars is, in an ersatz sense, the religious question of whether we as a race have salvation. The John 3:16 of this movement is, "Earth is the cradle of mankind, but one does not remain in a cradle forever."

The Mars Society holds an essay contest to come up with essays about why we should colonize Mars; the title of the contest, and perhaps of the essays, is, "Why Mars?" And, though I never got around to writing it, there was something I wanted to write.

This piece, having a fictional setting, would be written from the perspective of a sixteen year old girl who was the first person to be raised on Mars, and would provide another comparison of life on Mars to life on earth. And the essay would be snarky, sarcastic, angry, and bitter, because of something that people looking with starry eyes at a desired Mars colony miss completely.

What does the Mars Society not get about what they hope for?

When I was a student at Wheaton College, one of my friends told of a first heavy snowfall where students from warmer climates, some of whom had never experienced such a snowfall personally, were outside and had a delightful snowball fight. And they asked my friend, "How can you *not* be out here playing?" My friend's answer: "Just wait four months. You'll

see."

One's first snowball fight is quite the pleasant experience, and presumably one's first time putting on a spacesuit is much better. But what my unattractively cynical friend didn't like about Wheaton's winter weather is a piece of cake compared to needing to put on a spacesuit and go through an airlock on a planet where the sum total of places one can go without a bulky, heavy, clumsy, uncomfortable, and hermetically sealed spacesuit, is dwarfed by a small rural village of a thousand people, and dwarfed by a medium sized jail. If you are the first person to grow up on Mars, the earth will seem a living Eden which almost everyone alive *but you* is privileged to live in. And the title of the snarky, sarcastic, and bitterly miserable essay I wished I could write from the perspective of the first human raised on Mars was, "*Why Earth?*"

I'm used to seeing people wish they could escape the here and now, but the Mars Society took this to a whole new level—so much so that I was thinking, "This is not a job for science and engineering; this is a job for counseling!" People were alienated from the here and now they had on earth, and the oomph of the drive to go to Mars seemed to be because of something else entirely from the (admittedly very interesting) scientific and engineering issues. Having the human race not even try to live on Mars was so completely unacceptable to them because of their woundedness.

If you don't know how to be happy where God has placed you, escape will not solve the problem. In the case of Mars, the interesting issue is not so much whether colonization is possible, but whether it is desirable. Escape may take you out of the frying pan and into the thermite. (What? You didn't know that astronauts do not feel free, but like tightly wedged "spam in a can," with land control micromanaging you more than you would fear in a totalitarian regime, down to every bite of food you take in? Tough; a real opportunity to colonize Mars won't feel like being in an episode of *Star Trek* or *Firefly*.)

This is the playing out of a passion, and what the Mars Society seeks will not make them permanently happy. Success in their goals will not cure such misery any more than enough fuel will soothe a fire.

Confucius said, "When I see a virtuous man, I try to be like him. When I see an evil man, I reflect on my own behavior." Assuming you're not from the Mars Society (and perhaps offended), do you see anything of yourself in the Mars Society?

I do.

A more satisfying kind of drink

I talked with a friend about a cookbook, [Nourishing Traditions](#), which I like for the most part but where there was a bit of a burr: the author ground an axe against alcoholic beverages fermented by yeast. The stated position of the book is a report of a certain type of traditional nutrition, and the author overrode that when it came to traditions that used rum and such.

My friend said that what I said was accurate: certain more alcoholic drinks were traditional, and the principles of [Nourishing Traditions](#) did not support all the ways the author was grinding an axe against yeast-fermented alcohol, just as I thought. However, my friend suggested, the author was right about this. Lacto-fermented beverages, fermented by another ancient process that gives us cheese, sourdough, sauerkraut, corned beef, and the like, which [Nourishing Traditions](#) did promote, satisfy in a way that yeast-fermented beverages do not. People, it seems, use beer, wine, and liquor because they remind them of the satisfaction of the more ancient method of fermentation.

I'm not looking at giving up the occasional drink, but something of that rings true—and parallels a spiritual matter. People turn to a quest for the exotic, and that is illicit. But the Orthodox experience is that if you stay put, in the here and now, and grow spiritually, every year or so something exotic happens that is like falling off a cliff, when you repent. And that may be what people are connecting with in the wrong way in the pursuit of the exotic. If you give up on following the exotic, something beyond exotic may follow you.

The idiot

There was another piece that I was thinking of writing, but did not come together. The title I was thinking of was, *The Idiot*—no connection to Dostoevsky's work of the same name, nor to what we would usually think of as a lack of intelligence.

I was imagining a Socratic dialogue, along the same lines as [Plato: The Allegory of the... Flickering Screen?](#) in which it unfolds that the person who doesn't get it is someone who has great success in constructing his own private world through technology, introspection, and everything else. Etymologically, the word "idiot" signifies someone who's off on his own—someone who does not participate in the life of civilization—and our civilization offers excellent resources to dodge civilization and create your own private world. And that is a loss.

And being an idiot in this sense is *not* a matter of low IQ. It is not the mentally retarded I have known who need to repent most, if at all. Usually it is the most brilliant I have known who best use their gifts and resources to be, in the classical sense, idiots.

Some adamantine-hard metal files that may hone us

At the risk of irony after opening by a complaint about words of wisdom from other lands selected for being exotic...

My mother recounted how a friend of hers was visiting one of her friends, a poor woman in Guatemala. She looked around her host's kitchen, and said, "You don't have any food around." Her hostess said, "No, I don't, but I will," and then paused a moment longer, and said, "And if I had the food now, what would I need God for?" That woman is wise. Those of us who live in the West pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," and probably have a 401(k) plan. Which is to say that "Give us today our daily bread" is almost an ornament to us. A very pious ornament, but it is still an ornament.

If we are entering hard times today, is that an end to divine providence?

St. Peter of Damaskos wrote, in [The Philokalia vol. 3](#),

We ought all of us always to thank God for both the universal and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvelous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The particular gifts consist of all that God has given to each individual. These include:

- Wealth, so that one can perform acts of charity.
- Poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude.
- Authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgment and establish virtue.
- Obedience and service, so that one can more readily attain

salvation of soul.

- Health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God.
- Sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience.
- Spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue.
- Weakness and ignorance, so that, turning one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility.
- Unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may even be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving alms.
- Ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain the virtues and thus become dispassionate and fit to save other souls.
- Trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection.

All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused, they are not good, but are harmful for both soul and body.

The story is probably apocryphal, but I heard of an African pastor (sorry, I don't know his nationality) who visited the U.S. and said, "It's absolutely amazing what you can do without the Holy Spirit!" That is, perhaps, not what we want to hear as a compliment. But here in the U.S., if we need God, it's been easy to lose sight of the fact. Homeless people usually know where their next meal is coming from, or at least it's been that way, and homeless people have been getting much more appetizing meals than bread alone. Those of us who are not homeless have even

more power than that.

An English friend of mine talked about how she was living in a very poor country, and one of her hosts said, "I envy you!" My friend didn't know exactly what was coming next—she thought it might be something that offered no defense, and her hosts said, "You have everything, and you still rely on God. We have *nothing*; we have no real alternative. So we rely on God. But you have *everything*, and you still rely on God!" The point was not about wealth, but faith. The friend's awe was not of a rich woman's treasures on earth, but a rich woman's treasures in Heaven. The camel really *can* go through the eye of the needle, and we may add to the list of examples by St. Peter of Damaskos, that we may thank God for first world wealth, because it gives us an opportunity to *choose* to rely on God.

Maybe we can add to St. Peter's list. But we would do well to listen to his wisdom before adding to his list. We have been given many blessings in first world economic conditions, and if our economy is in decline—perhaps it will bounce back in a year, perhaps longer, perhaps never—we no less should find where our current condition is on the list above.

To have the words "Give us this day our daily bread" unfortunately be an ornament is rare, and perhaps it is not the most natural condition for us to be in. Whatever golden age you may like, centuries or millenia ago, there was no widespread wealth like we experience. Our natural condition is, in part, to be under economic constraint, to have limits that keep us from doing things, and in some sense the level of wealth we have had is not the most natural condition, like having a sedentary enough job that you only exercise when you choose to, is not the most natural condition. Now I don't like being constrained any more than I have to, and I would not celebrate people losing their homes. However, if we have to be more mindful of what they spend, and don't always get what we want, that may be a very big blessing in disguise.

Dorothy Sayers, speaking of World War II in "The Other Six Deadly Sins" (found in [Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World](#) and other essay collections), discussed what life was like when the economy was enormously productive but as much productivity as possible was being wasted by the war effort. What she pointed out was that when people got

used to rationing and scarcity, they found that this didn't really mean that they couldn't enjoy life—far from it. People could enjoy life when most of their economy's productivity was being wasted by war instead of wasted by buying things that people didn't need. She argued that England didn't have a choice about learning to live frugally—but England could choose to apply this lesson once the war got out. England didn't, and neither did the U.S., but the lesson is still good.

A recent news story discussed how adult children moved in with their parents as a measure of frugality, where the family was being frugal to the point of planning meals a month in advance and grinding their own flour. And what they found was that living simply was something of an adventure.

An unlikely cue from science fiction?

Mary Midgley, in [Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning](#), says of science fiction and science fiction writers,

But the best of them have understood, as Wells and Stapleton did, that their main aim was imaginative. They were using 'the future' as a screen on which to project timeless truths for their own age. They were *prophets* primarily in the sense in which serious poets are so — spiritual guides, people with insight about the present and the universal, rather than literal predictors. For this purpose, it no more matters whether these supposedly future events will actually happen than it does for *Hamlet* and *MacBeth* whether what they show us actually happened in the past. The point of *The Time Machine* is not that the machine would work, nor that there might be Morlocks [a powerful, privileged technological elite] somewhere, some day. It is that there are Morlocks here now.

Note the last words. C.S. Lewis may quite directly and literally believe in a literal Heaven and a literal Hell, but Lewis understands Midgley's closing point well, even if he wrote [The Great Divorce](#) decades before. He offers an introduction that ends with, "The last thing I wish is to arouse curiosity about the details of the after-world." He may have no pretensions of knowing the details of the next life, but the reason he writes so compellingly about Heaven and Hell is not that someday, somewhere, we will experience Heaven or Hell. (Even if that is true.) He is able to write with such depth because Heaven and Hell are in us, here and now. And one of the cardinal spiritual factors in [The Great Divorce](#) is a cardinal spiritual factor here now. It is called repentance.

In [The Sign of the Grail](#), Fr. Elijah brings George, a Christian, into the communion of the Orthodox Church. Orthodox speak of this as a conversion, but this means something beyond merely straightening out George's worldview. Fr. Elijah may share wisdom with George, but he is interested in something fundamentally beyond getting George to accept a worldview. He is trying, in all of his various ways, to get George to *wake*

up. It is the same as the blessed spirits in [The Great Divorce](#) who are in Heaven and keep saying to visitors from Hell, "*Wake up! Wake up!*" They do often discuss ideas with their visitors, but their goal is never merely to straighten out a tormented worldview; it is to open their visitors' spiritual eyes so they will wake up to the reality of Heaven.

In [The Great Divorce](#), visitors come from Hell, visit Heaven, keep receiving invitations to wake up and live in Heaven, and mostly keep on choosing Hell. If it is put that way, it sounds like a very strange story, but it is believable not primarily because of C.S. Lewis's rhetorical powers, but because of the spiritual realities Lewis knows to write about. I have only heard one person claim to want to go to Hell, and then on the misunderstanding that you could enjoy the company of others in Hell. However, people miss something big about Hell if they think everybody will choose Heaven.

God does not send people to Hell, but the fires of Hell are nothing other than the light of Heaven experienced through the rejection of Christ. Hell appeared as a seed in the misery when, as I wrote earlier:

Adam reigned as an immortal king and lord over the whole world. He had a wife like nothing else in all Creation, paradise for a home, and harmony with nature such as we could not dream of. *And*, he was like a little boy with a whole room full of toys who is miserable because he wants another toy and his parents said "No."

[The Sermon on the Mount](#) says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." But *everyone* will see God. God is love; his love is absolute and will flow absolutely. Because of that love, everybody will see God. And the saved will know this as blessing and as bliss beyond description. But to those who reject Christ, the light of Heaven, the light of seeing God, will be experienced as *Hellfire*. Hell is Heaven experienced through the rejection of the only ultimate joy that exists: Christ.

Repentance is recognizing that you are in a little Hell and choosing to leave by the one way you do not wish to leave. Elsewhere from the quotation from St. Peter, [the Philokalia](#) says, "People hold on to sin because they think it adorns them." The woman addicted to alcohol may

be in misery, but she has alcohol to seemingly anaesthetize the pain, and it is incredibly painful to give up the illusion that if you try hard enough and get just a bit of a solace, things will be OK. That's a mighty hard thing to repent of: it's easier to rationalize, decide to give it up by sheer willpower (perhaps tomorrow), or make a bargain to cut back to a more reasonable level—anything but wake up and stop trying to ignore that you're standing barefoot in something really gross, and admit that what you need is not a bigger fan to drive away the stench while you stay where you are, but to step out in a cleaning operation that lasts a lifetime and cuts to your soul.

An alcoholic walking this path craves just a little bit of solace, just for now, and it is only much later that two things happen. First, the cravings are still hard, but they are no longer *quite* so overpowering. Second, she had forgotten what it felt like to be clean—really and truly *clean*—and she had forgotten what it was like to be doing something else with her life than trying to hide in a bottle. She had forgotten what freedom was like. And long after she gave up on her way of escaping life, she found she had forgotten what it was like to experience life, not as something to escape, but as something with joy even in its pain.

The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the *inside*. This much is true of passion: we think our sins adorn us, and we try to flee from the only place joy is to be found. Fleshly lust disenchant the entire universe; first everything else becomes dull and uninteresting, and ultimately stronger doses of lust lose even the semblance of being interesting. Spiritual lust, the passion that seeks escape from where God has placed us is, if anything, a sin with a higher pay grade than the fleshly lust that is bad enough, but spiritual lust too is the disenchantment of reality, a set of blinders that deflates all the beauty we are given in nature. Spiritual lust is the big brother of merely fleshly lust. Spiritual lust is something really, really, *really* gross that we need to step out of and get *clean*. We need to realize that the passion does not adorn us, that the sparkle of an exotic escape from a miserable here and now is, on a spiritual plane, spin doctoring for experiencing the here and now with despair. We do not see that we need not an escape from what God has given us, but gratitude and contentment.

But what if the here and now is not the best here and now? What if it's with an Uncle Wally who tells sexist jokes no matter how you ask him to stop? What if the people you are with have *real* warts? There are a couple of responses. You might also think of what your uncle has done that you might be grateful for. You know, like when he helped you find and buy your first car. Or you could learn the power of choosing to be joyful when others act unpleasantly. Or you might read C.S. Lewis, [The Trouble with X](#), and then look at how you might stand to profit from praying, with the Orthodox Church, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Once, when things went from hard times to easy times, one saint complained, saying that easy times rob the Church of her martyrs and her glory. If we are entering hard times, that does not place us outside of God's reach nor Christ's promise in [the Sermon on the Mount](#): "For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

*I glorify Thee,
Who hast cast Adam out of Paradise,
That we might learn by the sweat of our brow
The joy and the life that Adam scorned
As King of Paradise.
Glory be to the Father
And to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages.
Amen.
Glory forever.
And glory be to Thee,
Thou who blessest us
For better or for worse,
In sickness and in health,
In the Eternal Light and Love
Who illuminest marriage.
Glory forever.
Glory be to thee whose blessings are here,*

*Not in an escape,
But in the place wherein Thou hast placed us.
Glory forever.
Glory be to Thee,
Who offerest Eden,
To us men who forever dodge our salvation.
Glory forever.
Glory be to the Father
And to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
Both here and now, and in Eternal Life that beckons us
The Son of God became a man in his here and now in Bethlehem.
In your forever honored place,
From this very moment,
Become a Son of God.
Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near,
Heaven awaits with open arms,
Step out of Hell.
Grieve for your sins,
That grief that holds more in her heart,
Than discovering that the scintillating escape from Hell
Scintillates only as a mirage.
And the repentance you fear,
So constricted it seems from outside,
Holds inside a treasure larger than the universe,
Older than time,
And more alive than life.
Glory beyond glory,
Life beyond life,
Light beyond life,
The Bread from Heaven,
The infinite Living Wine,
Who alone canst slake our infinite thirst,
Glory forever.*

*Glory be to God on high.
Glory forever.
Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost,*

Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages,

Amen:

Glory forever.

Alleluia!

An Author's Musing Memoirs About his Work

Reflections, Retractions, and Retracings

Taking a second look at some of what I wrote

Dear Reader,

Years back, when I was a math grad student, I wrote a short essay entitled, [Why study mathematics?](#) The basic thought was connected with the general education math class I was taking, and it is not really an article for why to specialize in mathematics through intensive study, but why a more basic knowledge of math can be a valuable part of liberal arts education. Much like how I taught my class, I did not speak favorably of memorizing formulas—pejoratively called "mindless symbol manipulation" by mathematicians—but spoke of the beauty of the abstractions, the joy of puzzles and problem solving, and even spoke of mathematics as a form of weight lifting for the mind: if you can do math, I said, you can do almost anything. I was sincere in these words, and I believe my obscure little piece captures something that a lot of math students and faculty sensed even if they did not explain their assumption. Since then, there are some things I would say differently. Not exactly that I was incorrect in what I said, but I worked hard to climb a ladder that was leaning against the wrong building.

One famous author in software development, who wrote a big book about "software engineering", had said, "What gets measured gets improved," and began to express second thoughts about his gung-ho enthusiasm for measurement. He didn't exactly *take back* his words of,

"What gets measured gets improved," but he said that the most important things to understand are rarely things that are easy or obvious to measure: the mantra "What gets measured gets improved," is a mantra to ruthlessly optimize things that often are less important than you might think. His second thoughts went further: the words "software" and "engineering" have been joined at the hip, but however hard software developers have tried to claim to be engineers, what they do is very different from engineering: it's an apples and oranges comparison.

I would pretty well stand by the statement that if you can deal with the abstraction in math, you can deal with the abstraction in anything: whether chemistry, analytic philosophy, engineering, or sales, there isn't much out there that will call for more abstract thinking than you learn in math. But to pick sales, for instance, not many people fail in sales because they can't handle the deep abstraction. Sales calls for social graces, the ability to handle rejection, and real persistence, and while you may really and truly learn persistence in math, I sincerely doubt that mathematical training is a sort of industrial strength preparation for social graces and dealing with rejection. And even in engineering, social graces matter more than you might think; it's been said that being good at math gets you in the door, but social influence and effectiveness are what make a *real* superstar. I would still stand by a statement that if you can handle the abstraction in math, you can probably handle the abstraction in anything else. But I'm somewhat more wary of implying that if you have a mathematical mind, you just have an advantage for everything life may throw at you. **That's simply not true.**

There are some things I have written that I would like to take back, at least in part, but even where my works are flawed I don't believe mass deletions are the best response. I would rather write what might be called "Retractions and retracings" and leave them available with the original works. [Why study Mathematics?](#), whatever its flaws, gives a real glimpse into the beauty that draws mathematicians to mathematics. I may be concerned with flaws here, but they are not the whole truth. However, there are some things I would like to comment on, some flaws to point out. In many cases, I don't believe that what I said is mainly wrong, but I believe it is possible to raise one's eyes higher.

HOW to HUG

Mathematics may be seen as a skill, but it can also be how a person is oriented: jokes may offer a caricature, but a caricature of something that's *there*. One joke tells of a mathematician who finds something at a bookstore, is delighted to walk home with a thick volume entitled *HOW to HUG*, and then, at home, is dismayed to learn he purchased volume 11 of an encyclopædia. And I mention this as a then-mathematician who wrote [A Treatise on Touch](#), which may be seen as interesting, may be seen as deep, and may have something in common with the mathematician purchasing a book so he could know how to hug.

Part of what I have been working on is how, very slowly, to become more human. This struggle is reflected in [Yonder](#), which is at its most literal a struggle of philosophers to reach what is human. There is an outer story of disembodied minds set in a dark science fiction world, who are the philosophers, and there is a story within a story, an inner story, of the tragic beauty of human life. When I showed it to a science fiction guru, he suggested that I cut the philosophical dialogues down by quite a bit. The suggestion had a lot of sense, and quite possibly a traditional publisher would want to greatly abbreviate the sections that he suggested I curtail. But I did not follow his advice, and I don't think this was just author stubbornness. When literature builds up to a success, usually the path to success is filled with struggles and littered with failures. This is true of good heroic literature, and for that matter a lot of terrible heroic literature as well. (Just watch a bad adventure movie sometime.) [Yonder](#) is a story that is replete with struggles and failures, only the failures of the disembodied minds have nothing to do with physical journeys or combat. They begin stuck in philosophy, mere philosophy, and their clumsy efforts to break out provide the failures, and therefore to greatly abridge the philosophical discussion would be to strip away the struggle and failure by which they reach success: a vision of the grandeur of being human. Like much good and bad literature, the broad sweep was inspired by [The Divine Comedy](#), opening with a vision of Hell and building up to a view of our painful life as a taste of Heaven, and you don't tell [The Divine Comedy](#) faithfully if you replace the [Inferno](#) with a brief summary stating

that there are some gruesome images and a few politically incorrect ideas about sin. The dark science fiction world and its mere philosophy provides the vision of Hell that prepares the reader to see the humanness of Heaven and the Heaven of humanness. The inner story can be told by itself; it is for that matter told independently in [A Wonderful Life](#). But there is something in [Yonder](#), as it paints the stark, dark, disturbing silhouette of the radiant, luminous splendor and beauty of human life.

While I was a math undergrad, I read and was deeply influenced by the *Tao Te Ching*; something of its influence may be seen in [The Way of the Way](#). That work has its flaws, and I may have drunk too deeply of Taoism, but there was a seed planted that I would later recognize in fuller forms in the Orthodox Way. I had in full my goals of studying and thinking, but I realized by the way that there was some value to be had in stillness. Later I would come to be taught that stillness is not an ornament to put on top of a tree; it is the soil from which the tree of life grows.

After I completed my studies in math, and having trouble connecting with the business world, I took stock, and decided that the most important knowledge of all was theology. I had earlier planned to follow the established route of being a mathematician until I was no longer any good for mathematics and then turning out second rate theology. My plans shifted and I wanted to put my goal up front and, I told my pastor, "I want to think about theology in community." (If you are wincing at this, good.) So, in this spirit, I applied to several schools and began the study of academic theology. If you are an astute reader, I will forgive you if you ask, "But isn't this still a mathematician looking for a book on how to hug?" The goal I had, to teach at a university or even better train Orthodox priests at a seminary, was a laudable enough goal, and perhaps God will bless me with that in the future. Perhaps he wants the same thing, but perhaps God first wants to free me from the chain of being too much like a mathematician wanting to learn how to hug by reading a book.

During my time studying theology at Cambridge, I was received into the Orthodox Church. I am grateful to God for both a spiritual father whose lenience offered a corrective to my legalistic tendencies, and for a

godfather who was fond of reading Orthodox loose cannons and who helped me see a great many things that were invisible to me at the time. For instance, I asked him for help on some aspect of getting my worldview worked out correctly, and I was caught off guard when he explained, "You aren't being invited to work out the Orthodox worldview. You're being invited to worship in the right glory of Orthodoxy, and you are being invited to walk the Orthodox way." In that sense Orthodoxy is not really a system of ideas to work out correctly that, say, a martial art: there may be good books connected to martial arts, but you learn a martial art by practicing it, and you learn Orthodoxy by practicing it. And in that response, my godfather helped me take one step further away from being a mathematician trying to find a book that will teach him how to hug. (He also gave me repeated corrections when I persisted in the project of trying to improve Orthodox practices by historical reconstruction. And eventually he got through to me on that point.)

Becoming Orthodox for me has been a matter of becoming really and truly human, or at least beginning to. There is a saying that has rumbled down through the ages in different forms: in the second century, St. Irenaeus wrote, *"For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God."* I have not read this in much earlier sources, but I have read many later phrasings: *"God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man and the sons of man might become gods and the sons of God."* *"The divine became human that the human might become divine."* *"The Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God."* And one real variation on this has been quoted, *"Christ did not just become man so that I might become divine. **He also became man that I might become a man.**"*

If Christ became man that I might become human, this is manifest in a million ways in the Orthodox Church. Let me give one way. When I was preparing to be received into the Orthodox Church, I asked my godfather some question about how to best straighten out my worldview. He told me that the Western project of worldview construction was not part of the Orthodox Way: I had been invited to walk the Orthodox Way but not

work out the Orthodox worldview. If there is in fact an Orthodox worldview, it does not come from worldvish endeavors: it arises out of the practices and life of the Orthodox Church, much in line with, "*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.*" Not just corrections, but being caught off-guard by effectively being told, "Here are some of many rules; there is no need for you to know all of them. They are important, and you need to strive for strict excellence, but you are not treating them in the right spirit if you hold them rigidly and legalistically. (Work out with your priest how you will best bend them.)" The Orthodox Church's nature as essentially an oral tradition has helped cure me of silly things like meticulously studying ancient texts to put my mind to an antiquarian reconstruction and answer the question, "How should we live?" (The Orthodox Church is ancient, but it is not really infected with antiquarian reconstruction efforts.) The rhythm of the liturgy and its appointed seasons, the spiritual housecleaning involved with preparing for confession, the profoundly important community of the faithful: all of these are part of how it works out in the Orthodox Church that God became man not only so that I might become divine, but also so that I might become more truly man.

Part of this becoming human on my part also has to do with silence, or as Orthodox call it, hesychasm. Part of the disorder of life as we know it is that our minds are scattered about: worrying about this, remembering that pain, and in general not gathered into the heart. Mathematical training is a training in drawing the mind out of the heart and into abstract thinking. The word "abstract" itself comes from the Latin *abstrahere*, meaning to pull back (from concrete things), and if you train yourself in the habit of abstraction you pull yourself back from silence and from what is good about the *Tao Te Ching*.

In [Silence: Organic Food for the Soul](#), I all but closed with the words, "Be in your mind a garden locked and a fountain sealed," which speaks about having a mind that is gathered together and is in the fullest sense mind: which is not when abstract thinking is its bread and butter. Perhaps some of the saints' wisdom is abstract, but it does not come from building an edifice of abstractions.

The terms *intellect* and *mind* mean something very different in

Orthodox classics than they do in today's English. The difference is as great as the difference between using *web* to mean a physical object woven out of spider's silk and *web* to mean interconnected documents and media available over the internet. Today you might say, "The intellect is what an IQ test measures." An Orthodox saint who had been asked might have said, "The intellect is where you meet God." The mind is an altar, and its proper thought flows out of its being an altar: in [Within the Steel Orb](#), a visitor from our world steps into a trap:

"And your computer science is pretty advanced, right? Much more advanced than ours?"

"We know things that the trajectory of computer science in your world will never reach because it is not pointed in the right direction." Oinos tapped the wall and arcs of pale blue light spun out.

"Then you should be well beyond the point of making artificial intelligence."

"Why on a million, million worlds should we ever be able to do that? Or even think that is something we *could* accomplish?"

"Well, if I can be obvious, the brain is a computer, and the mind is its software."

"Is it?"

"What else could the mind be?"

"What else could the mind be? What about an altar at which to worship? A workshop? A bridge between Heaven and earth, a meeting place where eternity meets time? A treasury in which to gather riches? A spark of divine fire? A line in a strong grid? A river, ever flowing, ever full? A tree reaching to Heaven while its roots grasp the earth? A mountain made immovable for the greatest storm? A home in which to live and a ship by which to sail? A constellation of stars? A temple that sanctifies the earth? A force to draw things in? A captain directing a starship or a voyager who can travel without? A diamond forged over aeons from of old? A

perpetual motion machine that is simply impossible but functions anyway? A faithful manuscript by which an ancient book passes on? A showcase of holy icons? A mirror, clear or clouded? A wind which can never be pinned down? A haunting moment? A home with which to welcome others, and a mouth with which to kiss? A strand of a web? An acrobat balancing for his whole life long on a slender crystalline prism between two chasms? A protecting veil and a concealing mist? An eye to glimpse the uncreated Light as the world moves on its way? A rift yawning into the depths of the earth? A kairometer, both primeval and young? A—"

"All right, all right! I get the idea, and that's some pretty lovely poetry. (What's a kairometer?) These are all very beautiful metaphors for the mind, but I am interested in what the mind is literally."

"Then it might interest you to hear that your world's computer is also a metaphor for the mind. A good and poetic metaphor, perhaps, but a metaphor, and one that is better to balance with other complementary metaphors. It is the habit of some in your world to understand the human mind through the metaphor of the latest technology for you to be infatuated with. Today, the mind is a computer, or something like that. Before you had the computer, 'You're just wired that way' because the brain or the mind or whatever is a wired-up telephone exchange, the telephone exchange being your previous object of technological infatuation, before the computer. Admittedly, 'the mind is a computer' is an attractive metaphor. But there is some fundamental confusion in taking *that* metaphor literally and assuming that, since the mind is a computer, all you have to do is make some more progress with technology and research and you can give a computer an intelligent mind."

That litany of metaphors summarizes much of my second master's thesis. Which is not really the point; but my point here is that on an Orthodox understanding, intellect is *not* something you measure by an IQ test and a mind is *not* the spitting image of a computer. The mind, rightly understood, finds its home in prayer and simple silence. The intellect is

where one meets God, and its knowing flows out of its contact with God and with spiritual reality. And, in the metaphors of the [Song of Songs](#), the mind as it is meant to be is "a garden locked, a fountain sealed", not spilled out promiscuously into worry, or grudges, or plans for the future that never satisfy. And this gathering together of the mind, this prayer of the mind in the heart, is one that was not proposed to me by my mathematical training.

Now I should mention that I have a lot to be grateful for as far as math goes. There are a lot of people who gave of themselves in my training; there are a lot of people who gave of themselves in the various math contests I was involved in. And, not to put too fine a point of it, I have a computer job now which is a blessing from God and in which I build on a strong mathematical foundation. It would be silly for me to say, "I am not grateful for this" as God has provided me many blessings through math. But I need to place things like "I have a lot of math awards" alongside what a monk said to a maid and to me: she was fortunate in the job she had, as manual labor that allowed her mind to pray as she was working in inner stillness, while I as a computer person was less fortunate because my job basically required me to be doing things with my mind that don't invite mental stillness. My job may be a profound blessing and something not to take for granted. But he was pointing out that the best jobs for spiritual growth may not be the ones higher on the pecking order.

A streak of escapism

There is a streak of escapism in much of my work. If you read [Within the Steel Orb](#), I believe you will find insight expressed with wonder, and I would not take back any of that. But the wisdom, which is wisdom from here and now, is expressed as the alien wisdom of an alien world that panders to a certain escapism. Wisdom and wonder can be expressed without escapism; [Hymn to the Creator of Heaven and Earth](#) and [Doxology](#) both express wisdom and wonder in a way that does not need to escape from a disdained here and now. But there is a thread of escapism in much of my work, even as I have sought to reject it.

During or shortly after I was in high school, I wrote a note in an online forum arguing that *Terminator 2* had shot itself in the foot. The movie had a scene with two little boys angrily playing with toy guns and the voiceover complained about how tragic this was, and at the end the message was made even more explicit: "If a machine, a terminator, can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too." But the movie was an action-adventure movie, meaning a movie whose attraction was built on glorified violence with guns blazing. In terms of a movie that would speak out against violence, contrast it with a movie idea I had, for a movie that would rush along at an action-adventure clip for the first few minutes and then slow down like a European art film; from [Lesser Icons: Reflections on Faith, Icons, and Art](#):

What I did do was to outline a film idea for a film that would start out indistinguishably from an action-adventure movie. It would have one of the hero's friends held captive by some cardboard-cutout villains. There is a big operation to sneak in and deftly rescue him, and when that fails, all Hell breaks loose and there is a terrific action-adventure style firefight. There is a dramatic buildup to the hero getting in the helicopter, and as they are leaving, one of the villain's henchmen comes running with a shotgun. Before he can aim, the hero blasts away his knee with a hollow-nosed .45.

The camera surprisingly does not follow the helicopter in its rush to glory but instead focuses on the henchman for five or ten

fast to glory, but instead focuses on the henchman for five or ten excruciating minutes as he curses and writhes in agony. Then the film slows down to explore what that one single gunshot means to the henchman for the remaining forty years of his life, as he nursed a spiritual wound of lust for vengeance that was infinitely more tragic than his devastating physical wound.

By contrast, it may be clearer what might be called shooting yourself in the foot in the *Terminator 2* syndrome, and as far as escapism goes, I have a couple of pieces that shoot themselves in the foot with something like a *Terminator 2* syndrome. In [The Voyage](#), the miserable young Jason is an escapist and, when he meets an old man, asks the old man's help in an escape he doesn't believe is possible. The old man deftly opens Jason's eyes to the beauty of this world, the beauty of the here and now, that are simply invisible to him. I stand by everything I wrote in that regard. But the closing line, when thanks to the old man Jason triumphs over escapism, is, "And Jason entered another world." Which is to say that the story shot itself in the foot, like *Terminator 2*.

There may be a paradoxical link between escapism and self-absorption. Self-absorption is like being locked in your room and sensing that it is constricting, and so you wish that you could be teleported up to a spaceship and explore the final frontier, or maybe wish for a portal to open up that would take you to the Middle Ages or some fantasy world. And maybe you can get a bit of solace by decorating your room like someplace else and imagining that your room is that other place, and maybe you can pretend and do mind games, but they don't really satisfy. What you miss is what you really need: to unlock the door, walk out, visit a friend, go shopping, and do some volunteering. It may not be what you could arrange if you were controlling everything, but that's almost exactly the *point*. It may not what you want, but it is what you need, and it satisfies in a way that a quest to become a knight, at least in your imagination, cannot. And my own concerns to escape self-absorption and escapism play out in my writing: [The Spectacles](#) is more successful than [The Voyage](#) in telling of an escape from the Hell of self-absorption and escapism; I've been told it's my best short story. But it still has the imprint of self-absorption even as it tells of someone finding way out of self-absorbed escapism. And something of that imprint affects my

writing: there are some good things about my fiction, but I have been told that my characters are too similar and are only superficially different. I do not think I will ever receive the kind of compliment given to Charles Dickens, that he envisions a complete universe of different characters. People may say that my satire like [Hayward's Unabridged Dictionary](#) shows a brilliant wit and is bitingly funny, but you can be pretty full of yourself and still write good satire. By contrast, it takes humble empathy to make a universe of characters worthy of Dickens.

A door slammed shut: *God's severe mercy*

I earned a master's in theology, and entered into a doctoral program. I thought for a long while about how to say something appropriate about that program, and I think the best I can do is this:

I've been through chemotherapy, and that was an experience: overall, it was not as bad as I feared, and I enjoyed life when I was going through chemotherapy. I still cherish [The Spectacles](#), the first piece written after a long dry spell because I was drained by illness. I'm not sure it is a nice thing to have powerful cytotoxins injected into your body, and the rough spots included the worst hour of (purely physical) pain in my life, but on the whole, a lot of progress has been made in making chemotherapy not as bad as it used to be, and I had good people to care for me.

And then there are experiences that, to put it politely, put chemotherapy into perspective. My entering this doctoral program and trying to please the people there was one of those experiences into perspective: during that time, I contacted a dean and wrote, "I found chemotherapy easier than dealing with [*a professor I believed was harassing me*]," and received no response beyond a secretary's brush-off. After this ordeal, my grades were just below the cutoff to continue, and that school is not in any way going to give me nice letters of reference to let me finish up somewhere else. I suppose I could answer spam emails and get a diploma mill Ph.D., but I don't see how I am in a position to get the Ph.D. that I wanted badly enough to endure these ordeals.

And if I ask where God was in all this, the answer is probably, "*I was with you, teaching you all the time.*" When I was in middle school, I ranked 7th in the nation in the 1989 MathCounts competition, and I found it obvious then that this was because God wanted me to be a mathematician. For that matter, I didn't go through the usual undergraduate panic about "What will I major in?" Now I find it obvious that God had something else in mind, something greater: discipleship, or

sonship, which may pass through being a mathematician, or may not. Not straying too far from this, I wanted a Ph.D., and I thought that this would be the best way to honor him with my abilities. Again I was thinking too narrowly; I was still too much of the mathematician looking for a book to teach him how to hug; again the answer seemed to be, "*That's not the issue. Aim higher and be my servant.*" As it turns out, I have four years' graduate work in theology; that has some use in my writings, and even if it didn't, the issue is not whether I am a good enough achiever, but whether I am faithful.

During this time I read quite a lot of medieval versions of the legends of King Arthur. There were a couple of things that drew me to them, both of them rather sad. The first was pride, both pride at thinking I was going to be an Arthurian author, and pride at sometimes reading medieval legends in the original.

But the second reason I kept reading them was that compared to what I was covering in theology class, reading the legends almost seemed like I was actually studying *theology*. (At least by comparison.) Whether a course in theological foundations that assumed, "We need to work from the common ground that is shared by all the world's religious traditions, and that universal common ground is Western analytic philosophy," or reading that theologians are scientists and they are every bit as much scientists as people in the so-called "hard sciences" like physics, or a course in "philosophy and contemporary theology" that was largely about queer matters and such topics as ambiguous genitalia, the whole experience was like "Monty Python teaches Christian theology." And it would be a funny, if tasteless joke, but it was really something much more tragic than a Monty Python riff on theology. And in all this the Arthurian legends, which are really quite pale if they are held next to the grandeur of Christian theology, none the less seemed to give respite for me to study.

In the light of all this, there are three basic things that I wrote. The first is the Arthurian book I wanted to write out of all the medieval books I was reading:

- [The Sign of the Grail](#)

The second thing is a group of pieces that were written largely as rebuttals to things I ran into there. (The university was a "Catholic" university, so they were generous to us Orthodox and treated us like liberal Catholics.) I've had enough contact with Catholics outside that university; those pieces are not written just in response to being at a "Catholic" university.

- [Dissent: Lessons From Being an Orthodox Theology Student at a Catholic University](#)
- [An Open Letter to Catholics on Orthodoxy and Ecumenism](#)
- [Religion and Science Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution](#)

I believe there is some merit in these pieces, but not that much: if they say something that needs to be said, they are limited to winning an argument. Theology can win an argument and some of the best theology is meant to win an argument, but the purpose of real theological writing is to draw people into the presence of God. These pieces may say something valuable, but they do not really do the job of theology: *beckon the reader to worship before the throne of God.*

But that leaves the third group of pieces written in the wake of that un-theological theology program, and that is precisely pieces which are written to draw the reader to bask in the glory of God. The ones I would pick as best are:

- [Doxology](#)
- [God the Spiritual Father](#)
- [Lesser Icons: Reflections on Faith, Icons, and Art](#)
- [Silence: Organic Food for the Soul](#)
- [Technonomicon: Technology, Nature, Asceticism](#)

So where does this leave me now?

I think I've made real progress but I still have a lot in common with that mathematician who bought a book so he could learn how to hug. Be that as it may, I have a lot to be thankful for.

I had my heart set on completing my program, but in 2005 I started a Ph.D. program that was estimated to take eight years to complete. And since then, the economy tanked. And in this, a gracious and merciful God didn't give me what I *wanted*, but what I *needed*. Actually, more than that. In the aftermath of the program, I took some anthropology and linguistics coursework which on the one hand confirmed that I was already good at learning languages (the woman who scored the MLAT for me said, "I've scored this test for thirty years and I've never seen a score this high,") and on the other hand, paradoxically provided good remedial understanding of things I just didn't *get* about my own culture. And there's something I'd like to point out about that. God provided academic coursework to teach me some things that most people just pick up as they grow, and perhaps studying academic theology was what God provided to help me get on to something that is at once more basic, greater, and more human: entering the Orthodox Church, and entering real, human theology.

But back to after the anthropology courses. Then the economy took a turn for the worse, and I found a good job. Then the economy got worse than that, and my job ended, and I had my fast job hunt yet and found an even better than that. There's no way I'm entitled to this; it is God's gracious providence at work. These are blessings covered in the divine fingerprints.

I still have failings to face: rather spectacular failings which I'd rather not detail. And it God's grace that I am still learning of my clumsiness and my sin, and realize I really need to face ways I don't measure up. But that is really not the issue.

Does God work with flawed people?

Who else does he have to work with?

He has glorious, majestic, awesome, terrifying holy angels. But there is another glory when God works in and through flawed people.

Even the sort of mathematician who would read a book on how to hug ([or maybe write one](#)). The worst of our flaws is like an ember thrown into the ocean of God's transforming power.

And the same God wills to work in you, whatever your flaws may be.

Much love,
Christos Jonathan Seth Hayward

Maximum Christ, Maximum Ambition, Maximum Repentance

[Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!](#)

That is how the way was paved,
For the coming of the Son of God,
Perfect God and Perfect Man:
Maximum God and Maximum Man,
Maximally united,
Yet the Divine and human natures,
Maximally unconfused:
This is what the Church proclaims,
In her maximum Christology,
Proclaiming the Maximum Christ.

[Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!](#)

[Repent, and believe the Gospel.](#)
The [Revelation to St. John](#) tells,
Words that bear hard truth in hard times:
[And I heard the altar cry,](#)
["Yea, Lord God the Almighty,](#)
[True and just are thy judgments!"](#)
[The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun,](#)
[And it was allowed to scorch men with fire;](#)
[Men were scorched by the fierce heat,](#)
[And they cursed the name of God,](#)

Who had power over these plagues,
And they did not repent and give him glory.
The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast,
And its kingdom was in darkness;
Men gnawed their tongues in anguish,
And cursed the God of heaven
For their pain and sores,
And did not repent of their deeds.

If our time looks like a time of plagues,
Do not be like these.
Repentance is not intended,
For a more ideal time:
Do not pray as the Blessed Augustine:
"O Lord, give me chastity and continence,
But not yet,"
Do not seek to repent later,
But keep on struggling to repent *now*.
Do you live in tough times,
And do you fear for even worse disasters?
Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Do you not see?
Are your eyes closed?
God is not gone in a global financial crisis:
Do you not see,
The hand of God,
Working to give in hard times,
What we overlooked in a comfortable age?
Can you not see a God
Who whispers in our pleasures,
Shouts in our pains,
Whispers also, in times of comfort and ease,
And shouts in a time of crisis,
Crisis,
Κρισις,
A Greek word meaning,
"Judgment."

If we experience judgment,
Do we need to assume the Judge has abandoned his post?
Do we really need to try and escape him?
[Make friends quickly with your accuser!](#)

Would you rather know God as your friend or accuser?
[It hurts you to kick against the goads.](#)
Are you terrified to face what you have to repent of?
Take courage:
Repentance terrifies like nothing else,
An unconditional surrender,
Terrifying to a saint as much as to either of us,
Only afterwards does it show its true nature,
As an awakening and more:
As Heaven's best-kept secret.

God has ambitions for you,
Beyond your wildest dreams,
And commands you to want the best for yourself.
And if it seems that God only gives you,
Things that are harder and worse,
Then you do not understand this:
God's desires for you are beyond your wildest dreams:
Your wildest dreams are yet not wild enough,
To see the true good that God holds in store for you.

And if you say,
"Beautiful words, but I have a tough life,"
Know that words like these come from tough lives,
Hard realities where something great shines so brightly:
The Light of God in Heaven.
Do you fear the loss of your treasures on earth,
Are you afraid you do not have enough to survive?
[Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,](#)
[where neither moth nor rust consumes,](#)
[and where thieves do not break in and steal,](#)
Nor do global economic meltdown or hyperinflation
Do anything but strip away a mask,

That makes it look as if we can live by bread alone,
Or comfort ourselves with a "rising standard of living,"
Like as to moving from an ancient, rounded, nourishing diet,
To "upgrade" to cotton candy,
Seeking a Utopia of spoiled children,
Because what we need is not what a child wants to spoil him,
But to grow to be men:
And this crisis, κρισις, may do much more,
Than separate the men from the boys:
It will help some boys learn to be men,
Learning under the iron yoke of law,
What we kept putting off under the freedom of grace,
As we curse the cruel judgment of a Judge,
Who "cruelly" shouts,

"Sorry, son, it is time for you now,
To move on to better things.
I have real ambitions for you,
And I want what is truly good as you cannot,
And I know what is truly good as you cannot.
Try again.
Try again about what you really want.
I want you to taste the River of Life,
And you keep on trying to drink filth,
[Like your dog drinking from your toilet:](#)
Please try again.
I want you to have real treasure,
And if what it takes is my taking away every treasure on earth,
Everything that you want,
And everything you turn to for security,
So that you lose your job,
And your possessions begin to wear out,
And some of your technologies come to fail,
In ways you had never even imagined,
And your investments become worthless,
And your luxuries vanish one by one,
And the government does everything people want it to,

But the results get worse and worse,
And maybe you even pray,
[Give us this day our daily bread](#),
Because you do not know,
Where your next meal is coming from,
Who knows?
Perhaps you will listen to me shout,
When you found my whisper easy to ignore,
Perhaps you will stop chasing after shadows.
Perhaps you will grasp reality:
Perhaps you will know real treasure,
Real treasure,
Next to which a bull market,
Is but mist, vapor, and shadow."

[Repent, and believe the Gospel.](#)

Our entire understanding of what it means to be God,
And our entire understanding of what it means to be man,
Is the Maximum Christ.
For man is created for maximum glory,
And God ever beckons us to reach higher,
When we in confusion reach far below,
Far less than the glory we were made for.
Every sin does this,
Even pride.
What do we want in pride?
Inevitably something that sparkles and shimmers,
But is cotton candy and mirage,
Next to the humble things we turn our nose up at.
In pride we turn up our nose,
At abundant health,
And do not want the freedom of movement,
Of a body in health,
But clingingly cherish,
Our "extra-special" movement of broken bone,
And yet we wonder why we hurt,
And why we are not satisfied,

Even though we have what we clingingly cherish,
Not knowing it is the seed of Hell.
You do not understand the measure of man,
Until you know in Christ,
Who, though he was in the form of God,
Did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
But emptied himself,
Taking the form of a servant,
Being born in the likeness of men.
And being found in human form,
He humbled himself,
And became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore God has highly exalted him,
And bestowed on him the name which is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
We do not understand greatness except in Christ,
And in Christ we understand that greatness is humble,
For there is something missing in our lives,
Until they are oriented by Christ,
And we know that pride cannot be enough:
God summons us to the heights of humility.
Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Repent, and live real life in a virtual world.
Industrial food is not like the food of ancient times:
It is tasty on the outside,
Manipulated like plastic on the inside,
A cherry flavored drink engineered that the palate may reminisce of
cherry taste,
While holding nothing of the nourishment and sustenance,
That comes with cherry sweetness in nature,
Almost like eating an "apple" molded of styrofoam,
Injected with Splenda,

Sprayed with petroleum-based fragrance,
And sprinkled with vitamin extract,
So it may be marketed as health food.
Do not think that this be isolated as a phenomenon:
It is a microcosm of our virtual world,
Where so much of our reality is virtual,
That "virtual reality" neither begins nor ends with SecondLife.
Christ knew a life of technologies,
The son of a carpenter with tools and wood,
But never like techno-pagans,
Was his technology
The technology of molding nature to man's every whim,
Seeking HumanLife version 2.0:
Or if you believe that Christ's technology was exactly that,
But less advanced,
At least know that it is different,
As a pint of beer,
From a pint of rum:
As today we mold nature to our whims,
Graduating from pint of rum to pint of absinthe,
Our TV's always on, and stronger brew,
Placing before our souls, our mind's eyes,
The strange brew of HumanLife 2.0... 3.0... 4.0...
Trying to improve on timeless reality,
And failing,
And failing.
Entranced by technology with its flickering screens,
[Twice imprisoned in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave,"](#)
The gate to the timeless way of human life,
Lies open, and if the path be narrow and hard,
It has always been narrow and hard:
Our hindrances may be our aids,
If we use them rightly,
In ascesis,
If we go against the flow,
Of technologies ever more brittle,
From appliances, cookware, and clothing built to last,

To possessions that keep wearing out,
To more and more disposable possessions,
When we abandon glass plates for the convenience of paper.
From computers discarded because they are obsolete,
To computers whose solid state drives become something you use up,
From physical computers that are in your control,
To virtual cloud computers,
That you may easily use now,
But can be taken away by any number of human actions,
Or system failures:

"Systems integration is when your computer will not work,
Because of a problem on a computer you've never heard of;"
"If builders built buildings the way programmers wrote programs,
The first woodpecker that came along would destroy civilization."
Use technology but don't trust it.

We are digging a pit,
In how we use technology,
And the progress we embrace,
Is digging ourselves in deeper.
And what is true of technology,
Is also true of much more:
The story of our culture, our world, our economy,
Is as a game of chess against a demonic adversary,
Where we have greedily captured:
An unguarded pawn here, and a bishop there,
Never heedful of the trap we were stepping into,
Taking seeming advantage of our opponent's cunning bait,
All the way to sealing his checkmate against us,
Until our world and society have lost the game,
And yet still redemption is open to us,
Redemption open to every one who repents,
Living real life even in a virtual world.
But if we repent, the Kingdom of God ever remains nigh.

You have already met Christ.
So have I,
Both of us many times,

And yet we forget this central fact.
Wonder when you have met him?
Hear Christ's own words,
Hear Christ's own Christology unfold:
When the Son of man comes in his glory,
And all the angels with him,
Then he will sit on his glorious throne.
Before him will be gathered all the nations,
And he will separate them one from another,
As a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,
And he will place the sheep at his right hand,
But the goats at the left.
Then the King will say to those at his right hand,
"Come, O blessed of my Father,
Inherit the kingdom prepared for you,
From the foundation of the world;
For I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you clothed me,
I was sick and you visited me,
I was in prison and you came to me."
Then the righteous will answer him,
"Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee,
Or thirsty and give thee drink?
And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee,
Or naked and clothe thee?
and when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?'
And the King will answer them,
"Truly, I say to you,
As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren,
You did it to me."
Then he will say to those at his left hand,
"Depart from me, you who are damned,
Into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;
For I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not clothe me,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Then they also will answer,

"Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty,
Or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison,
And did not minister to thee?"

Then he will answer them,

"Truly, I say to you,
as you did it not to one of the least of these,
you did it not to me."

Could this be irrelevant to survival?

People survived the Great Depression by sharing:

If you don't share because you have little,

You simply don't get it.

The less you have,

The more you need to be generous, and believe,

Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,

But righteousness delivers from death.

If you want to survive,

Help others survive:

Lend to the Lord and he will repay you,

In his time:

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,

And he will repay him for his deed.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,
saith our God:

Fear not: for, behold,

I bring you good tidings of great joy,

which shall be to all people:

Christ wills to be incarnate in us,

Not in some other circumstance, but now.

The Son of God became a man,

That men might become the sons of God:

The Incarnation,

Is for us today.

If our earthly hope is stripped away,
Our heavenly hope beams brighter:
The mighty arm of God in divine providence,
Rippling with muscle such as easy times rarely know.
If our cherished neighborhood frisbee is shut down,
Perhaps it is because we are summoned,
To reach for gold at spiritual Olympics,
To become men,
And as in [the great hymn to love](#),
Put childish ways behind us.

[Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!](#)
[Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,](#)
[and Christ shall give you light.](#)
Awaken to God's maximum ambitions for you.
But the door to the heart can only be opened from the inside,
And the door of the heart that opens to God,
Is called repentance,
The door we are terrified to open:
The door we must open:
[Arise, shine; for your light has come,](#)
[and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.](#)
[The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;](#)

[Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!](#)

Doxology

How shall I praise thee, O Lord?
For naught that I might say,
Nor aught that I may do,
Compareth to thy worth.
Thou art the Father for whom every fatherhood in Heaven and on earth is
named,
The Glory for whom all glory is named,
The Treasure for whom treasures are named,
The Light for whom all light is named,
The Love for whom all love is named,
The Eternal by whom all may glimpse eternity,
The Being by whom all beings exist,
יהוה
O ΩN.
The King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
Who art eternally praised,
Who art all that thou canst be,
Greater than aught else that may be thought,
Greater than can be thought.
In thee is light,
In thee is honour,
In thee is mercy,
In thee is wisdom, and praise, and every good thing.
For good itself is named after thee,
God immeasurable, immortal, eternal, ever glorious, and humble.

What mighteth compare to thee?
What praise equalleth thee?
If I be fearfully and wonderfully made,
Only can it be,
Wherewith thou art fearful and wonderful,
And ten thousand things besides,
Thou who art One,
Eternally beyond time,
So wholly One,
That thou mayest be called infinite,
Timeless beyond time thou art,
The One who is greater than infinity art thou.
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
The Three who are One,
No more bound by numbers than by word,
And yet the Son is called Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ,
The Word,
Divine ordering Reason,
Eternal Light and Cosmic Word,
Way pre-eminent of all things,
Beyond all, and infinitesimally close,
Thou transcendest transcendence itself,
The Creator entered into his Creation,
Sharing with us humble glory,
Lowered by love,
Raised to the highest,
The Suffering Servant known,
The King of Glory,
Ο ΩΝ.

What tongue mighteth sing of thee?
What noetic heart mighteth know thee,
With the knowledge that drinketh,
The drinking that knoweth,
Of the νοϋς,
The loving, enlightened spiritual eye,
By which we may share the knowing,
Of divinised men joining rank on rank of angels

OF DIVINED MEN JOINING TALK OF TALK OF ANGELS.

Thou art,
The Hidden Transcendent God who transcendest transcendence itself,
The One God who transfigurest Creation,
The Son of God became a Man that men might become the sons of God,
The divine became man that man mighteth become divine.

Beyond measure is thy glory,
The weight of thy power transcendeth,
Thy power of thine all-surpassing authority bespeaketh,
And yet art thou,
Not in fire, not earthquake,
Not wind great as maelstrom,
But in soft gentle whisper,
Thy prophets wait upon thee,
For thy silence is more deafening than thunder,
Thine weakness stronger than the strength of men,
Thy humility surpassingly far exceedeth men's covetous thirst for glory,
Thou who hidst in a manger,
Treasure vaster than the Heavens,
And who offerest us glory,
In those things of our lives,
That seem humble to us,
As a manger rude in a cavern stable.

Thou Christ God, manifest among Creation,
Vine, lamb, and our daily bread,
Tabernacled among us who may taste thy glory,
Art come the priest on high to offer thy Creation up into Heaven,
Sanctified,
Transfigured,
Deified.

Wert thou a lesser god,
Numerically one as a creature is one,
Only one by an accident,
Naught more,
Then thou couldst not deify thine own creation.

Whilst remaining the only one god.

But thou art beyond all thought,
All word, all being,
We may say that thou existest,
But then we must say,
Thou art, I am not.
And if we say that we exist,
It is inadequate to say that thou existest,
For thou art the source of all being,
And beyond our being;
Thou art the source of all mind, wisdom, and reason,
Yet it is a fundamental error to imagine thee,
To think and reason in the mode of mankind.
Thou art not one god because there happeneth not more,
Thou art The One God because there mighteth not be another beside
thee.
Thus thou spakest to Moses,
Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Which is to say,
Thou shalt admit no other gods to my presence.

And there *can* be no other god beside thee,
So deep and full is this truth,
That thy Trinity mighteth take naught from thine Oneness,
Nor could it be another alongside thy divine Oneness,
If this God became man,
That man become god.

Great art thou,
Greater than aught that can be thought,
And thus dealest thou,
With thy Creation.

For thou camest into the world,
O Christ,
Thy glory veiled,
But a few could see thy glory,

In a seed.

But thou returnest soon,
In years, or centuries, or ages untold,
A day or a thousand years, soon,
Then a seed no more.
None shall escape seeing you,
Not an angel choir to shepherds alone,
But rank on rank of angel host.
Every eye shall see thee,
And they also which pierced thee,
Thou camest and a few knees bowed,
Thou wilt return,
And every knee shall bow,
And every tongue shall confess,
Jesus Christ is Lord,
To the glory of God the Father,
As the Father triumphs in the Son.

Who mighteth tell of thy glory, thy might?
We hope for Heaven yet,
Yet the Heavens cannot contain thee.
Great art O ΩN,
And greatly to be praised.
Thou art awesome beyond all gods,
Who sayest,
Wound not my christs.
For the Son of God became the Son of Man,
That the sons of man might become the sons of God,
And the divine image,
The ancient and glorious foundation,
And radix of mankind,
Be transfigured,
Into the likeness of Christ,
And shine with uncreated Light,
The glory of God shining through his sons.

Let our spiritual eye be ever transfixed upon thine eternal radiant

glory,
Our hearts ever seeking thy luminous splendour,
Ever questing,
Ever sated,
Slaked by the greatest of draughts,
Which inflameth thirst.

Glorified art thou,
In all ages,
In every age,
Thy soft, gentle whisper,
Speaking life,
In every here and now,
And today.

Let us give our lives,
To thine all-surpassing greatness,
From this day,
From this hour,
Henceforth and forevermore.

Αμην,
So be it. Amen.