Putting Ourselves Out There: Making Our Virtual Lives Virtuous

BY AMY R. GRIZZLE KANE

What will we say on our Facebook walls? Will we build up or tear down? Will our blogs and tweets inspire hope or transmit hatred? Will we speak up when we witness on-line hurt to others or will we look away?

Everybody is Facebook fighting. Well, maybe not everybody, but many of us are increasingly choosing to air our grievances by having what Seinfeld might call a Facebook festivus.[1] A recent New York Times article explores Facebook fighting as a new cyber social reality many of us are forced to confront in our instant-access, technology-crazed world. A husband said of his wife on Facebook, "How is it my birthday is only one day, but my wife's birthday is a whole week?" Most of us see the humor in a good-natured Facebook jab; however, according to the article, "Whether through nagging wall posts or antagonistic changes to their 'relationship status,' the social networking site is proving to be as good for broadcasting marital discord as it is for sharing vacation photos."[2]

How many of us even think twice about posting frustration online about our relatives, boss, coworkers, or classmates? It may be as innocent a jab as a ludicrous vacation picture, but it is worth asking ourselves, as Christians, what are we putting out there for the world to see?

Digital technologies invite us to put ourselves out there for the world's viewing pleasure, and criticism, like never before. With Skype video conferencing we can 'see' and talk with family and friends across the world as if they were sharing the well-loved couch and sipping a glass of sweet iced tea in our living room. Facebook connects us; Twitter keeps us up to date; and

YouTube tells us to "broadcast yourself." The funny and the awkward, the good and the bad about ourselves — we put it all out there in cyberspace… well, because we can.

Our personal human struggles have never been more widely visible to the public. It is a two-sided coin. Sharing our virtual lives can make finding common ground and crafting a shared identity with other people easier and more meaningful. Or, it can simply reveal our pain to strangers and hold it before our faces as in an unbreakable mirror. Our failures become virtual realities we cannot escape.

We should not dismiss Facebook and the new social media simply as novelties for techno-savvy young people with too much time on their hands, even if some of us do long for the good old days of chatting with friends over a cup of coffee instead of instant messaging with them. For better or worse, the new social media are a powerful force in our world. As members of the Body of Christ, the Church, we cannot ignore our calling to be a transforming influence in the world, without being of it. The Apostle Paul's instructions to the Christians in ancient Rome, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2), is relevant teaching for us.

In September 2010, a young violinist who was a freshman at Rutgers University ended his life by jumping from the George Washington Bridge after his roommate broadcast online a secretly filmed, hurtful video. Just a few years earlier, an eighth grader committed suicide after learning an Internet romance was a cruel joke.[3] Cyberbullying, while a relatively modern term, cannot be dismissed as a virtual problem — it is a very real and present challenge confronting young people we know.

A friend of mine recently experienced online identity theft, a relatively new cyber social reality that can turn lives upside down in a heartbeat. Information about her bank accounts, her family, her pharmacy, and even her veterinarian were all compromised and used to illegally solicit a prescription for narcotics in her name. Not only was the situation a time-consuming hassle to repair, but it also left my friend feeling violated and fearful.

Another friend recently lost his wife to a Facebook affair — she and an old flame had reconnected online and she left her family and marriage to start over.

The idea of publicly airing our grievances with others is not just a modern concept: gossip is as old as dirt, and the pain and humiliation that it rains on lives it timeless. Likewise, slander, bullying, theft, and extramarital affairs are age-old problems that today are multiplied by adding the word "cyber" in front of them. That is our hard, shared, human reality. Does this mean that as Christians we should pull the plug on new information technologies?

Not if we are called to be the light of the world in Jesus' name, shining in the darkness for all to see. The new technologies are not simply places of moral danger, they are opportunities for witness and blessing others. Here we need to remember the Apostle's teaching: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:9-10).

We cannot leave our Christian identity at church on Sunday mornings—we are to be the love of God to the world just as Christ loved us. Our call to "be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord" as we "rejoice in hope, [are] patient in suffering, persevere in prayer" and "extend hospitality to strangers" (Romans 12:11-13) does not end when we sit down in front of a computer screen any more than it ends when we walk out of the sanctuary and into our homes, schools, and workplaces. God's grace and cyberspace do not have to be mutually exclusive; as God's people even when we are online, we can help make virtual reality a virtuous reality in Jesus' name.

Online social media can be a wonderful resource to stay connected with friends and family across the miles. Those who travel oversees for business, missionary work, or military service can stay in touch with loved ones in wonderful and life-giving ways. Church families are tweeting and blogging about the ways God is at work in the life of their congregation and community. Senior and young adults alike are using e-book readers to read several versions of the Bible on one device that makes the print as large as readers need it to be.

I even met my husband through an online dating service. If anyone had asked me whether I expected to discover the husband I had been praying for in this way, I would have laughed heartily in their face. I guess God heard me laughing. I had been as skeptical about impersonal online relationships as anyone. After more than enough in-person blind-dates-gone-wrong, the straw that broke the camel's back came when a dinner date asked me, an ordained minister, "So…you, like, pray and stuff?" Check, please! Some friends encouraged me to try eHarmony. It was a long process full of ups and downs, but eventually I was "matched" with "Sean from Bellaire, Texas" and we married in April, 2010. I was reminded that God works in wonderfully unexpected ways that far outweigh my understanding.[4]

I am not on eHarmony's payroll. I am not advocating that online dating is for everyone or that it is a quick fix for anyone who is lonely. It is not. With every technological privilege we need to use common sense guidelines and responsible moderation. Whether in cyberspace or real space, Paul's exhortation to each of us is the same: do not "think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but…think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Romans 12:3). As God's children, we must not bury our heads in the sand, pretending the moral dangers of

technology do not exist; nor should we let virtual evils be perpetuated by ignoring our virtuous reality as Christians to be light in the darkness to a fallen world both on and offline.

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To know and to be known—this desire lies within the depths of our being. It is why we cherish a compliment or smile when someone notices and likes our quirks, our gifts, and our wonderful God-created randomness.

We have many outlets for airing our grievances or for sharing with others who we are created to be. Which one will we choose? What will we say on our Facebook walls? Will we build up or tear down? Will our blogs and tweets inspire hope or transmit hatred? Will we speak up when we witness online hurt to others or will we look away?

No matter the online outlets we pursue, we can never let the transmission of megabytes of information be a substitute for nurturing our relationship with God or with each other, face to face, in real time. To be known, we also must invest the time to know. God calls to us to put ourselves out there, to share God's grace with one another and the world. How will we respond?

NOTES

1 The Festivus was celebrated in *Seinfeld* episode 166, "The Strike" (first NBC broadcast, December 18, 1997). Seinfeld's friend, George Costanza, recalls that his father instituted the alternate year-end holiday—"a Festivus for the rest of us"—for the airing of disappointment and grievances.

2 Douglas Quenqua, "I Need to Vent. Hello, Facebook," *New York Times*, May 17, 2010, *www.nytimes.com/2010/03/18/fashion/18facebook.html* (accessed September 15, 2010).

3 Amy Ellis Nutt, "Rutgers student's suicide shows dire consequence, ease of bullying in digital age," *The Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ), September 30, 2010, *www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2010/09/rutgers_suicide_shows_dire_con.html* (accessed September 30, 2010).

4 Amy Grizzle, "Online dating can be a match, even for a clergywoman," *Associated Baptist Press,* February 12, 2010, *www.abpnews.com/content/view/4835/9/* (accessed September 30, 2010).

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