

Advent 2008 Virtual Fireside Chat
2005 – 2008, 45th Birthday
A Halftime Survey: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Introduction, Holiday Greetings

Dear friend,

I am distributing this message only to those who want it, with my thanks for caring enough to engage with me at a deeper level than the usual greeting card or succinct one-page Christmas letter. It's the answer to the oft-asked questions, "How are you?" and "What's been happening in your life?"

By its length, this answer might seem narcissistic or self-absorbed, and perhaps it is. But you are important enough to me to be worth the time and effort necessary to prepare it, and I am both honored and grateful that you care enough to wonder the questions, and to devote the time and attention necessary to receive the answers.

Please accept my best wishes for a blessed Advent, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, and a joyful, perhaps even happy and prosperous, 2009. I wish you and I could relax together face to face on a brisk winter night before a cozy fire, enjoy a favorite beverage, and commune into the wee hours of the morning: sharing each other's joys, consoling each other in our sorrows, gleaned the wheat from the chaff of our experiences, learning from our failures and sharing our successes, both laugh and cry about our foolishness, rejoice in what little wisdom we may have been able to attain by the grace of God, and, regardless of our fortunes, practice gratitude for fellowship – the sheer joy of being alive, and able to relate in a sincere, honest, and heartfelt way to another human being; to know, and be known.

I would prefer to commune with you in person. But since time and distance separate us, I submit this message – this virtual fireside chat - to you instead, hoping that it will inspire us later to enjoy each other's company in person from time to time, laying the groundwork for future friendship. If you are interested in getting together in the foreseeable future, please let me know.

Since the Proverbs warn against the dangers of loquacity, I compose this with some trepidation, doing my best to edit carefully. Since it's the size of a small book, I encourage you to print it, settle down in a comfortable place, and read it in installments at your leisure, then respond as the Spirit moves you. For your convenience and mine, I have compiled the following Table of Contents.

Thanks again for being there, for caring enough to slow down and pay attention. I cherish you.

Merry Christmas,

Kris Freeberg

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Chapter 1 – Books Read (and one film viewed) Since 2004

Abuse:

Evans, Patricia
Engel, Beverly

Controlling People
The Emotionally Abusive Relationship

Borderline Personality Disorder:

Kreisman & Strauss
Reiland, Rachel

I Hate You – Don't Leave Me
Get Me Out of Here: My Recovery from Borderline Personality Disorder
Stop Walking On Eggshells: Taking Back Your Life When Someone You Care About Has Borderline Personality Disorder

Mason & Krieger

Depression Recovery:

Minirth & Meier
Osteen Joel

Happiness Is A Choice
Your Best Life Now

Economics:

Allen, David
Fodor, Eben

Getting Things Done
Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community
The Tipping Point
Your Money or Your Life
Getting a Life
48 Days to the Work You Love
Secrets of Six-Figure Women
The Underground History of American Education

Gladwell, Malcom
Dominguez & Robin
Blix & Heitmiller
Miller, Dan
Stanny, Barbara
Gatto, John Taylor

Family History:

Ohrt, Wallace

The Rogue I Remember
Immigrant Girl

Marriage:

Evans, Jimmy & Karen
Winner, Lauren
St. John Chrysostom
Gaither, Mark
Kendrick & Kendrick
Hanauer, Cathi

Marriage on the Rock
Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity
On Marriage & Family Life
Redemptive Divorce
The Love Dare
The Bitch in the House:
26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder:

Grayson, John
Cudney & Hardy

Freedom from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
Self-Defeating Behaviors

Spirituality:

Rawlings, Marjorie
Braga, Roman
Lungin, Pavel
Hendrickson Publishers
Nikodemos Orthodox Publishing Society
St. Dimitri of Rostov
Holy Apostles Convent
Sopko, Andrew

Holy Trinity Monastery
St. Tikhon's Monastery
Holy Myrrhbearers Convent
Pirsig, Robert

The Holy Bible
The Sojourner
Exploring the Inner Universe: Joy – the Mystery of Life
Film, "Ostrov" or "The Island"
Ante- & Post- Nicene Fathers
Man of God: Saint John of Shanghai & San Francisco

The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints
The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church
For a Culture of Co-Suffering Love: The Theology of Archbishop Lazar Puhalo
Jordanville Prayer Book
The Horologion
Texts from the Menaion
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Chapter 2 - On Orthodox Christianity

Why I am Orthodox. Over Thanksgiving dinner, my aunt asserted President-Elect Obama had won “by a landslide.” I asked her whether she was referring to the Electoral College or the popular vote and she couldn't remember, so I looked it up and learned that while it is true he took the Electoral College by a landslide, he had won by a popular vote of 53% - proving my point that we are such a disagreeable, divided nation that consequential decisions are usually split pretty much right down the middle.

A few days later, I wrote her the following:

We are disagreeable because we have lost our way. That is my concern, more than who wins a given election.

This is why I have worked so hard over the past dozen years to study church history, because I believe it boils down to our understanding of who God is (theology), and what the church is (ecclesiology). If we had a consensus there - if we had a common and agreed upon understanding of who God is, what His will is for our lives, how He manifests Himself in the world, and how to relate to Him, then a lot of these other pieces would fall into place, and we'd be relieved from this tedious polarization that is exhausting our politics, spirits, minds, emotions, relationships, and economies.

If we would all be honest, humble, and sincere enough to divest ourselves of our own prejudices and biases ("I'm Lutheran because my family is Scandinavian", "I'm Baptist because I'm from the South", "I'm Presbyterian because I'm Scottish", etc.), I am certain these questions can be answered objectively through scientific research (theology is, after all "The Queen of the Sciences").

In retrospect, I realize this is why I became Orthodox.

Over the past few years however, as I worked to deepen my faith, I struggled with despair.

Surmounting Despair. I still cling to the Orthodox Church, although sometimes it feels like it's by a thread. Despair is an all too common problem not just for me, but for a lot of people across both space and time – so much so that repeatedly in the short version of daily Orthodox morning prayers we admit despair and expectantly thank God for relief:

“Arising from sleep I thank Thee O holy Trinity because of the abundance of Thy goodness and long-suffering . . . in Thy compassion Thou raised me up, as I lay in despair; that at dawn I might sing the glories of Thy majesty”

and later,

“We thank Thee that . . . in Thy love for mankind Thou hast raised us up as we lay in despair, that we may glorify Thy majesty.”

Twice in a daily prayer: surely despair is a common affliction requiring constant vigil to overcome.

Deepening Communion with the Saints. I discovered the church in 1996 and wrote extensively about it then; converted and helped build a local church building in 1998, wrote more about it in subsequent letters, and read a lot of books, also listed completely in prior years' letters. Between 1996 and 2004 I studied,

prayed, worshiped, befriended the local monastery, and otherwise made a sincere effort to immerse myself in the faith.

In the 2003 letter I mentioned going through some trying times; they became so trying that I took a nine month break, from December 2003 through September 2004, during which time I met my wife. I resumed regular attendance that September, with her, and she converted the following October.

During that time, I made an effort to both immerse myself more deeply in the faith individually by developing a more rigorous habit of prayer, and research the church more objectively and soberly. The trying issue was unconfirmed child abuse accusations against laymen in my parish which upset me greatly since I feel so concerned about my own son and helplessly unable to watch over and protect him; and I was concerned to know whether our problem was localized, or systemic. So I actively researched corruption and abuse in the Orthodox Church, to learn how prevalent the problem was.

This inquiry shook my faith but did not destroy it. However, it was an unusual inquiry, one which many are not willing to do, since it could destroy the faith of some. Beside gaining a fair survey of the incidence of child abuse across the country (it's actually pretty rare, but one case is too many), I was also discouraged to learn about a financial scandal that was in the early stages of discovery but which now has become common knowledge and is in a very encouraging stage of resolution; and about the more subtle, regrettable nuances of church politics.

By 2004 I had been Orthodox for the better part of a decade and had become weary of my own ignorance and aware of my need to participate more fully in the communion of the saints by studying their lives more closely. At the end of every service the priest commemorates peculiar-sounding names of people who lived long ago and far away; I became tired of not knowing who they were, and reckoned I might benefit by learning. I also thought I might derive some encouragement from their examples to relieve my despair.

The Orthodox Church makes an effort to educate people about the lives of the saints, but also recognizes that time can be scarce for busy families. One way it has tried to strike a balance is by publishing little summaries in an annual calendar-book. After several years of buying and reading these books and noticing how they changed each year, I realized that the books I was getting were not original source material, but extremely shortened digests. I longed to know more, and to gain access to the unabridged biographies.

Eventually I found them, in a set of volumes called The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church. They are translated from the original Greek; each volume represents one month and is over a thousand pages long. Over the course of 2005-2006, I bought almost all the volumes and read them, one month at a time.

At the same time, I also bought and read The Prologue of Ohrid by St. Nikolai Velimirovich, a two volume set (first half of the year in one, second half in the other) of saints' lives, reflections, and homilies. It's shorter than the Synaxaristes but longer than the little calendar-books, and offers a unique glimpse of Orthodox Christianity from the Serbian point of view.

To give you an idea of how thorough the Great Synaxaristes is, some major saints' lives, instead of the paragraph or two one finds in the little calendar books or the Prologue, are 50-100 pages long. And each day, instead of one or two, five to fifteen saints are commemorated. It's the full-meal deal.

For example, on December 6 the life of Saint Nicholas (Santa Claus), Archbishop of Myra, is forty pages. (Wouldn't you like to know the real, unabridged story of Santa Claus?) The discussion of Christmas or Nativity is 64 pages long. On March 17, the life of Saint Patrick is 62 pages long, and on April 23, the life of

Saint George the dragon-slayer is 83 pages.

So I immersed myself in this material and collected the hymns – both words and music – that have been composed to these saints, over the course of the entire year. It was an edifying experience, and a lot of work. I haven't read the entire Synaxaristes yet, but I figure whatever I don't read, there's always next year.

But the history of Christianity is brutal. For the first three centuries it was illegal. There were a lot of persecutions and martyrdoms perpetrated by idolatrous pagan emperors, and internal doctrinal disputes as the early fathers strained to figure out what was true about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Since the rise of Islam in the 7th century, Muslims have joined in the persecution. After the Great Schism of 1054, there was conflict with the Roman Catholics, then after the Protestant Reformation, more doctrinal disputes with Protestants. In the 20th century most of Eastern Europe was assaulted by atheism and nihilism. Throughout it all there have been heinous tortures, heartless persecutions, bloody battles between professing Christians, internal persecutions because of malice or envy, and so on.

The end result of it all for me was, instead of gaining encouragement, I became discouraged. By the second year of my marriage, not only was I burdened by marriage-related issues; I was also burdened by current scandals and by the reading I had been doing of saints' lives, the collective moral of which seemed to be, “No good deed goes unpunished.” This exacerbated my depression.

The brutality, however, provides a stark contrast that made the saints' goodness so remarkable. In addition to incredible miracles which one may or may not believe depending on the strength of one's faith – miracles like resurrection, levitation, invisibility, flying, teleportation, restoration of severed limbs, clairvoyance, economic wonders, healing of fatal diseases, and much more – there are also more believable mortal virtues like courage, devotion, longsuffering, love of enemies, and eschatological priorities or “laying up treasures in heaven.”

But the lesson I learned from this experience is to undertake heavier spiritual reading cautiously with an experienced spiritual advisor. My problem was, to my knowledge none were locally available. In a sense, I was ahead of the curve, for I was reading the series as it was being published. It's still not complete; the final, twelfth volume is supposed to be published in 2009. I began reading the set when it was 67% complete: in 2005, only eight of the twelve volumes had been translated and published.

Now I am giving the local monastery its own set of The Great Synaxaristes. Perhaps in a few years we can all gather and study it together and encourage each other, with better guidance.

Nonetheless, I do not regret the reading I did, although there have been times I have doubted whether I should have; sometimes my wife and others would suggest that it's inappropriate for a layman to study so rigorously, that such books are better suited for monastics.

But theological rigor among the laity is a defining attribute of Orthodox Christianity, someone has to do it; someone has to be the third leg on the stool (clergy, laity, monastics). All three have to be strong and informed for the stool to stand.

When I studied comparative religions half a lifetime ago at North Seattle Community College, we learned of something called “The Dark Night of the Soul.” Recently, Time Magazine published a great article about Mother Theresa, showing in her private letters the doubt, anguish, and depression she suffered. Sometimes she felt God was not there, that she was just praying at the ceiling. She suffered a Dark Night of the Soul, and she had access to some pretty heavy-hitting spiritual guidance straight from the Vatican. Roman

Catholicism notwithstanding, the Vatican is pretty resource-rich by anyone's measure. Yet she suffered anyway.

In retrospect, I suspect a Dark Night of the Soul is an inevitable consequence of such thorough study, with or without close spiritual direction. How can one not be dismayed by brutality? How can one not feel discouraged by the world's hostility toward goodness? The only perfect man died on a cross, brutally murdered for the "sin" of being good. (I weep as I write.) How can anyone who squarely confronts that reality not suffer a Dark Night of the Soul at some point in their life?

This is the "Bright Sorrow" of Orthodoxy: the oppressive, dark, discouragement of the world, juxtaposed in stark contrast against the conspicuous, brilliant, unmistakable goodness of God; the death of the seed, and the life that results from its death; the endless cycle of hubris, nemesis, crisis, and catharsis; of life, death, and resurrection; willingness to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, confident in the joy on the other side, the light at the end of the tunnel; lighting the candle instead of cursing the darkness.

Also in 2005, I bought the 38-volume Ante- and Post-Nicene Fathers set. It was cheap, because there's so little demand for it: evidently, very few people bother to read such stuff any more. It contains the original writings of many of the early church fathers like Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine, Chrysostom, and many, many more. It has been a handy reference, but since I realized such heavy reading had been depressing me, I took a break. Recently I've been getting back into them.

Confronting and Accepting the Real Presence Doctrine. While I was struggling with what I had been learning about church scandals and abuse, I began to wonder whether the whole thing was one big lie.

At the center of it all is what happens on the altar: the Eucharist. Although they don't try to explain how it works through a doctrine of Transubstantiation as the Roman Catholics do, like the Catholics the Orthodox do believe that the elements in the chalice really are the body and blood of Jesus. They call this belief the "Real Presence Doctrine."

It always tastes like bread and wine to me, so I wondered whether this was also a lie, whether the Emperor was really wearing any clothes, and whether to just chuck it all and become a nice agnostic. I was angry because I felt deceived, after having invested so many years in the faith. It was a crisis which further distressed my poor wife, who had only recently converted, and caused her, understandably, to doubt my ability to be a spiritual head, as she still does now.

What prevented me from giving up was the fact that for 2,000 years, the Orthodox Church has been steadfast in its beliefs, regardless whether they're believable **to me**, and has done the best job, of all the expressions of Christianity I've seen, of living out the faith both inwardly and outwardly, horizontally and vertically.

So before chucking it all, I decided to do a little more research in the Ante-Nicene Fathers collection I had recently bought about the Real Presence Doctrine, and discovered the writings of Saint John of Damascus, who lived in the 7th century, during the rise of Islam and author of many hymns, especially those sung during Pascha or Easter.

He pointed out that just as it is possible for ordinary bread and wine to become our bodies and blood through the natural processes of digestion and nutrition – processes which we never question or doubt, but which are nonetheless amazing, even miraculous – so is it possible for the same God who designed those processes to undetectably convert the same elements into His own body and blood.

Or as a Protestant preacher once asked, how is it possible for a brown cow to eat green grass and produce white milk? It's a mystery.

So I decided, if a Protestant preacher can accept that mystery, I can accept the mystery of the Real Presence. (It still tastes like bread and wine to me, and that's okay.)

You may wonder, why should the Real Presence Doctrine matter? Can't we have a relationship with Jesus and believe in His salvation regardless?

Yes we can, as many heterodox Christians do. But the Orthodox Church is singular in its seriousness and steadfastness, qualities many appreciate. At the core of these qualities is the Real Presence Doctrine. It demands to be addressed, if one is to fully appreciate and acquire those same qualities. If it is false, then the whole Church is bogus since the Eucharist is at the center of its spiritual life. If it is true, then we need to accept it and participate intelligently.

(As an afterthought, having gotten back into the Ante-Nicene Fathers, I am reminded of how the second century pagans were similarly incredulous about bodily resurrection. How, they wondered, could a decomposed bodily possible reconstitute? Justin Martyr offered a similar explanation: just as we take ordinary digestion and nutrition for granted with respect to the Real Presence mystery, so also with respect to bodily resurrection do we take for granted sexual reproduction. Who would ever imagine, looking at the sperm and the egg, that a human body could ever result from such stuff? Yet it does. It's just as incredible as resurrection.)

Philosophy and the Fear of God. I'm a pretty basic guy, I like to focus on plain definitions:

- “Philosophy” is the love of wisdom. “Philo” = love, “sophy” = wisdom.
- “Theology” is the knowledge of God. “Theo” = God, “logy” = knowledge.
- “Economics” is household management. “Oikos” = household, “nomos” = rule.
- “Abuse” is depletion. “Ab-use” = use up, or deplete.

. . . and so on.

Defined as such, I've come to appreciate that these things are everybody's business, not just the business of philosophers, theologians, economists, and social workers.

Focusing on philosophy, I've come to regard philosophy more as a verb than a noun. It isn't a thing or a system of beliefs inside someone's head attributable to this or that thinker; it isn't really possible to discuss “my” philosophy, “your” philosophy, or “their” philosophy. Philosophy is simply the act of loving wisdom. To philosophize is to love wisdom – simple as that.

Philosophy has gotten a bad reputation both inside and outside of the church because without an absolute, objective reference point, it became subjectified and opinionized. Since the early fathers debated so-called philosophers, some in the church have mistakenly concluded that philosophy itself is the opponent, something to be eschewed that is hostile to Christianity. Meanwhile outside the church, ordinary secular people have also abandoned philosophy because bereft of its root meaning, it seems pointless, irrelevant to ordinary experience, and most certainly unprofitable!

But if we return to its root meaning – the love of wisdom – then I ask you, what's not to love about wisdom?

Isn't it – and therefore, philosophy - everybody's business? I'm convinced it is.

My poor wife: I used to ask her to philosophize with me. What I meant was, come love wisdom with me: let's sit down together, talk about what really matters, discuss what would be the most wise thing to do in this situation, and agree on a joint decision. But when she heard the word “philosophize” she would roll her eyes, look at her watch, and disengage.

What's ironic about that is that while we were courting, she would say how “wonderful” it was to know a man who “thought, felt, and cared so deeply” and “made her think.” (Similarly, my first wife used to call me her “Thinker.”) The first thing that interested her about me was that I was sitting under a tree reading a book. “A man who reads”, she thought to herself: “What an unusual thing.” To this day I still have trouble understanding why she thought it was so unusual, but there it is: to her, it was. (I suppose she must have had a very low opinion of men to suppose they don't read books, much less write them, when they obviously do.)

Within a very short time, however, she wished she could have a remote control that would shut me up (like Adam Sandler in the movie “Click”), then later complained of feeling as though she were drowning in depth or had been run over by a steamroller. (This discontent eventually led to the OCPD accusations.) So when I asked her to philosophize, she would feel the urge to escape for fear of drowning or flattening. Lord, have mercy.

I'm afraid of God. I mean, terrified, fall-down-on-your-face afraid. It's more than reverential awe, which I've heard my wife, counselors, even priests equate with it. No, reverence is reverence. Awe is awe. I'm talking fear, like being really, really scared, like the shepherds or Isaiah who fell down on their faces in fear; the dread that something really, really bad is going to happen to me if I don't make some changes, the feeling of imminent doom.

This fear has caused conflicts in my relationships, but it is also what has motivated me to give up some really self-defeating habits, like fear of dying of a fatal disease might motivate a smoker, drinker, or drug addict to quit.

Overall, I've found it's a good thing, but an unusual thing. I feel concerned that too few of us really fear God, confusing fear with reverence or awe, especially considering that the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. Does this mean that if we don't fear God, then we can't even begin to wise up, or philosophize? I'm afraid so.

So I encourage you to philosophize, and invite you to philosophize with me. Come, let us love wisdom together. Let's philosophize.

Men's Choir. The Orthodox Church is patriarchal. Not paternalistic; not misogynistic; patriarchal. This does not mean that women are less important than men; it just means they're different. Indeed, the Orthodox Church has done much to honor the contributions of women, beginning with Mary herself, proceeding to the myrrh-bearing women who were the first evangelists, and continuing with all the amazing, powerful women saints through the present day. In my dealings with my wife, the Orthodox Church has always been careful to protect and strengthen her, encouraging and equipping me to be a better man.

It seems obvious to me, and I assume it's obvious to you too, that there are a lot of people in this world who are sort of hobbling around with a huge father-wound in their hearts because of the father they had, or didn't have, as the case may be. By being patriarchal, the Orthodox Church offers the opportunity to be re-fathered, to heal some of those father-wounds, and to help people develop a personal and corporate relationship with

their Heavenly Father.

Personally, the way this has worked out is that although I had a pretty good dad, he has been more skilled at pointing out what is wrong than at promoting what is right. Do you know anyone like that? Yourself, perhaps? Consequently, I grew up to be a critical, judgmental jerk, very skilled at tearing down but not so good at building up, as my marital record shows. I don't mean to blame or dishonor my dad for my failures – ultimately they were the results of my choices – but there it is. Fathers are significant; their influence is powerful and consequential.

The Orthodox Church, through its patriarchy, introduced to me this whole business of blessing, about which I had absolutely no clue. Constantly, the Orthodox Church presents to us this image of a blessing father. It's good, and much needed, medicine.

Before I became Orthodox, I never felt very welcome in church. It seemed like a women's club. I can remember my Presbyterian pastor yearning in his sermons for “masculine, muscular Christianity” that does not just go on “*retreats*,” but is strong and virile enough to go on the *attack* against the gates of hell and knock them down, fulfilling Jesus' announcement that they will not stand.

Evidently my experience was ordinary, for in the circles I used to frequent, nationwide concern arose over the lack of male participation in church, so movements like Promise Keepers were formed to encourage men to get more involved, to sort of prop up their interest. Since it was assumed that most men are football fans, Promise Keepers was founded by a football coach and its meetings were held in football stadiums, reasoning that if men would rather watch football than go to church, then let's bring church to the football stadium.

When I became Orthodox, one of the things that made me feel welcome, like I had come home, was the sound of all-male choirs, commonly from seminaries or monasteries. Here was the masculine, muscular Christianity for which my pastor and I had been yearning. They sang in a way that female or mixed choirs can't, in a very deep, slow, continuous, powerful, contemplative way. It ran chills down my spine and made me cry, and motivated me to get involved, making peripheral para-church props like Promise Keepers unnecessary. It made me want to be in church, not at a football game.

I have also learned that men aren't the only ones to be blessed by the unique qualities of an all-male choir. Women and children are blessed, too, just by the sounds of men's voices singing in beautiful harmony. They seem to gain a certain reassurance or consolation from it.

I remember when I sang in a barbershop chorus ten years ago, as a fundraiser we used to deliver singing Valentines. Hired by their husbands or sweethearts, we would visit women and children at their homes and sing a Valentine love song to them. Sometimes the women would begin crying on the first vowel of the song, before they could even tell what song we were singing. Just the sound of men's voices in harmony – deep, rich, resonant harmony that only men can produce – immediately caused the tears to flow. It went straight to the heart, immediately. Similarly, kids were in rapt attention. That experience was very instructive and has always stuck with me.

The church is patriarchal. That's encouragement enough for men to be involved. We don't need extra props; we don't have to meet at a football stadium. It *is* that muscular, masculine church for which my Presbyterian pastor and I yearned. It's home.

And as Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote in his novel The Idiot, “Beauty will save the world.”

But the most beautiful choirs – the ones that really had that moving effect – were invariably from foreign countries, in foreign languages, having had hundreds of years to develop that mature, deep, heartfelt, spiritual sound. So far, to my knowledge, none like that exist in America, in English.

I have always yearned, and felt called, to form a men's choir that produces that effect in English so people can understand not just the spiritual attitude through the music, but participate in the profound prayer through the words as well.

To give you an idea of the kind of profundity I am trying to describe – how important it is to sing these hymns well in English - consider the following couple of examples:

The first is something we sing on Easter, a prayer to Jesus. Now, you have to realize, we understand Jesus not just as a man who lived 2,000 years ago, lived into his thirties, and taught good things. We understand Him to be the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, who has always existed. We see Him in the Old Testament as well as the New. Bearing this in mind, check out this hymn:

*Of old, Thou didst bury the pursuing tyrant beneath the waves of the sea.
Now the children of those who were saved, bury Thee beneath the earth.
But like the maidens, let us sing to the Lord,
For gloriously has He been glorified.*

Wow. Do you get the irony? (I weep as I write again, big crybaby.) As the second person of the Trinity, the Logos, Jesus saved the Hebrews who crossed the Red Sea with Moses. He was there, in the Old Testament, saving them. Then, when He became incarnate, the descendants of those same people whom He saved, *killed and entombed their own savior*, failing to recognize Him, despising and rejecting Him – as you and I so often do. And through the Resurrection, He overcame their betrayal, offering salvation to them again.

Do you see how this one stanza brings together the Old Testament, the New Testament, the present moment, and the future? Do you see the kind of heart-level transformation it can inspire? Do you see how it offers an example of ways we can respond when we are betrayed or misunderstood? Do you see why it's essential to get this sung well in English, so Americans can understand it?

Another favorite hymn of mine is to Saint John Chrysostom, author of the most popular liturgy, Archbishop of Constantinople in the fourth century, a contemporary of Santa Claus – also a man who was despised, reviled, misunderstood, persecuted, and exiled; also a man who championed philosophy. To him we sing,

*Grace shining forth from your lips like a beacon has enlightened the universe.
It has shown to us the riches of poverty,
It has revealed to us the heights of humility,
Teaching us by your word, our father John Chrysostom.
Intercede before the Word, Christ our God, to save our souls.*

Do you see the irony again? The riches of poverty, the heights of humility? And we're worried about our shrinking 401(k)'s and doing our best to avoid humiliation by shunning one another to save face, instead of embracing humiliation that we might attain the heights of humility? Do you see how badly the world needs to hear this message, to participate in this prayer, to get better acquainted with the likes of Saint John and learn more about this grace, and perhaps experience it directly, by hearing hymns like this sung well in English?

So I'm looking at the second 45 years, or so, of my life, God willing. I'm not so pleased with how the first 45 have gone, and am considering how I might live the second half differently.

Don't get me wrong: I'm really happy with my son, and the work I do is okay, although I find that I'm often juggling symptoms, not causes . . . behind every transaction is a motive which is usually spiritual. Motives are what cause the economy to do what it does; I often feel like I'm too late, trying to close the barn door after the horse has escaped. I get some satisfaction from the work I do, but I'd enjoy more if I could deal directly with the motives that cause the transactions I juggle. I find hymnody deals directly with the heart, where motives originate.

I love all three of my wives. One thing I've learned about myself – and about many men, it turns out – is that once we've loved a woman, we NEVER un-love them. They may abandon us, but we never stop carrying them around in our hearts. That's the way it is with me, anyway. So I'm pleased to have loved, even if it means risking and losing; like the old saying, better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

But I'm really sorry for being such a critical jerk, and for the shameful, heart-scattering, not-so-merry-go-round of wives I've experienced. I notice how the Church's influence of a blessing patriarchy has helped make me a little less of a jerk, and wonder what's next.

One option that occurs to me is monasticism, of which I'm not really worthy because I've been married three times and am a kind of old dog, maybe too old to learn new tricks according to my abbot friend. He has left the door open, but warned me to proceed slowly and carefully with such a decision.

Another option that occurs to me is to remain a layman, but devote the second half of my life to developing that English speaking men's choir. With long term commitment and focus of a solitary man, a guy might be able to accomplish great things and make a significant difference. Music and prayer can be so powerful, they deal with the heart, where motives germinate and all deeds originate, economic and otherwise. When I look for a divine nod, I perceive the strongest when I contemplate that option.

In the fall of 2007 my wife and I attended a wonderful Orthodox Church music conference in Seattle. It was truly world-class. I consulted with a man I met down there who trains those beautiful Russian basso profundo's we all know and love. He warned me that serious commitment to church music is a cross. It's one thing to feel called; it's another to fulfill the calling. There are bound to be daunting political and spiritual obstacles, and success requires the cooperation and participation of many people. One man's zeal is not enough to make it happen. But I'm considering offering myself, communicating the vision, and making a long term commitment to realizing it. I'll keep you posted on developments.

Monastery. Over the past almost ten years, I have worked to befriend a local monastery, the only male monastery in the state, to my knowledge. While I was in the National Guard, 2001-2006, I would visit on the way to or from weekend drills. After my wife and I became serious, I took her with me to a pilgrimage there in the summer of 2005, where the abbot took my favorite picture of us – the only picture I really like, actually.

In about 2004, they commenced a campaign to build more cells to accommodate more monks and otherwise develop the monastery. Having accepted advice to build the buildings larger than the foundations, they had to suspend the project when the frames of the buildings sagged under the weight of the roofs, making it impossible to sheetrock the walls and otherwise complete the project. Windows and doors would not work.

There these half-finished buildings sat for two years, and my friends became discouraged, for they were

inhabiting an antiquated fire-trap of a mobile home while they waited to finish the project, and the abbot was in constant pain for need of hip replacement surgery, which he couldn't get until the buildings were finished.

They couldn't get contractors to correct the problem because the task – retrofitting a foundation after the building was framed - was out of sequence; in their part of the state good contractors were hard to come by, and they had been robbed before by a crooked contractor, so they were apprehensive as to how to proceed.

So I have seen up-close and personal how everyone struggles with despair – not just laypeople, but also monks and clergy. We all have to encourage each other.

The task was simple, it was just hard to find people to do it: jack the buildings beyond level, excavate to bearing soil, pour concrete footings and pillars to support 4x6 beams, lower the buildings onto the beams, then insulate and cover the overhangs.

I gathered a few friends, one of whom knew how to drive an excavator, the rest of whom were basically casual labor. We did prep work in the summer of 2007, and completed the task during a ten-day push in the early fall. Since then they've finished the buildings and moved into them.

An added incentive to get it done was that the monks both needed hip replacement surgery (the younger monk's hip also gave out shortly after the project was complete) but couldn't get it until they had a place where they could convalesce with easy bathroom access. Now both the buildings and the monks are in fine form, and the monastery is prospering. With proper accommodations including a brand new, institutional grade kitchen and larger dining area, it can now receive larger numbers of visitors and be a conference destination for visiting clergy, which has since happened, much to my satisfaction. The former dining area has been converted into a splendid library.

And I can't help but notice the co-incidence between the completion of the monastery project and the beginning of my marital problems. We finished in October, and the kids' dad took them in November (I'll explain more about this in the next chapter). If you ever want to experience spiritual warfare, help build a monastery. Or put another way, if you want to help build a monastery, expect spiritual warfare. But also expect immense job satisfaction.

Standing on the Threshold of Heaven. One of the distinctive traits of Orthodox Christianity is the “Remembrance of Death.” Sounds morbid and unpleasant, doesn't it? It's part of that “Bright Sorrow.” The sorrow of death is obvious; but the brightness is about the Resurrection, that God and the soul are eternal, that this too shall pass, that we are sojourners, just visiting this planet, not of this world, living in a state of peaceful, blessed detachment with the things over which people are so inclined to fuss and bother.

Having hospiced my grandmother and my mother and buried several other friends and relatives, I've seen death up-close and personal. I'm at peace with it.

Now I have a dear family friend who is dying. She has had a long war with cancer. She has won many battles, but in the end it appears the cancer will win the war.

She's at peace with it. When she was first diagnosed many years ago, she prayed to live long enough to see her kids graduate from high school. She has since lived much longer – long enough to see them finish college too and have kids of their own. So she regards the life she has enjoyed since their high school graduations as a bonus.

Over the many years we have known each other (something like 25 or 30) inevitable offenses have occurred between us. But this is one of the very few relationships I've ever experienced during my first 45 years in which real repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration have occurred.

In most relationships I've experienced and observed so far, there are unresolved conflicts, denied sins, grudges, and estrangement at some level. Three times I married women believing they'd be my lifelong friends and intimates; three times I was wrong. Three times I pursued reconciliation with them to the point of harassment accusations.

And in every nuclear and extended family relationship I can recall, grudges exist at some level. People gloss over them to keep the peace, but like the "elephant in the room", they're still there, obstructing communion.

Not here. Sin, confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration have all occurred. I express this using the passive voice intentionally, for it does not matter who sinned against whom or who forgave whom. What matters is, we have experienced together God's will for all relationships everywhere. From my point of view, it is so rare as to be miraculous.

So here we stand, *after* total reconciliation, and *before* death. It is like standing on the threshold of Heaven: experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven in this life through the total redemption of our relationship, and soberly facing Heaven in the next life because of the inevitability and imminence of death. It is the most blessed thing I have ever experienced, and if I had to choose between the two, I would choose one hour in this state over ten years beleaguered by chronic estrangement. It is that sweet . . . and my Advent prayer for you and everyone would be that you could experience it, too.

Chapter 3 - On Husbandry: Lessons Learned

I must ask you to forgive me for being profoundly distracted and negligent over the past few years. They have been very eventful. In 2005 I became serious with a woman I had met in 2003, and married her in February 2006. Alas, it appears the marriage is already over so I will not mention her name. Obviously I'm grieving the disappointment and loss so if, in my grief, I choose my words poorly, I beg your clemency and understanding.

As you may remember from previous letters, my intention had been to remain solitary and hold out for reconciliation with Johann's mother. However after nine years of waiting, I came to accept her intransigence.

Meanwhile, I had become the object of this woman's affection. At first I did not understand what was happening. From the summer of 2003 through the spring of 2005, our relationship was platonic. At her initiative, we met while I was coaching the drum line for her kids' high school band. She hired me briefly in 2003, just two or three months to help her with her finances; I gave drum lessons to her son for a little while in 2004; but mostly, we corresponded casually but frequently by e-mail. I thought she was just friendly and outgoing, but by 2005 it became obvious she was trying to love me, and I had to decide whether to love her back.

I felt taken by surprise, for she was significantly older than I, and felt more like a big sister (indeed, while we were platonic she referred to herself as such) than a prospective wife, so you might say she caught me with my guard down. She had a mature, matronly quality that I admired. (Unfortunately – **Lesson #1** - I have found it is not possible to praise her for these qualities, and I conclude that, in general, women do not want to be told that they are mature and matronly, they take it as an insult. Nonetheless, they are qualities in her that I will always admire.)

From a previous marriage of 17 years, she had conceived and raised four children. I admired her maternal devotion and yearned for the same for my son Johann, and felt compassion for her plight as a “single mother.” If I had determined to search for a wife, she would not have been on my radar. Yet there she was, loving me . . . or so it seemed. In gratitude, I decided to love her back.

Despite concern over what the Bible has to say about remarrying divorced people (Matt. 5:32, Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18) – about which I had asked the church in writing for guidance but, sadly, received none - with its blessing I married her mere months after her conversion to Orthodoxy. It was a third marriage for both of us, and having experienced the fragility of romantic love, I mistakenly believed we both shared a very pragmatic, unromantic attitude about it.

Later – **Lesson #2** - I have come to learn that regardless of appearance, in their heart of hearts women want to be adored and romanced. If they are plain and pragmatic, it is by necessity or misfortune, not preference. They do not want to be praised solely for “inner beauty”; they want to be cherished for being outwardly beautiful too. In spiritual circles we are often told that inner beauty is all that really matters, but I have found this is not so. Inner beauty manifests outwardly. In the Orthodox Church we call this “Incarnational Theology.” Similarly, no matter how practical they may be, inwardly they yearn for romance, regardless of its fragility. The plain fact is, they want it.

What most mattered to me was having a trustworthy companion (which I also came to later learn – **Lesson #3** - offended her: “companion” = “sharing bread”, which is mundane and unromantic). I reckoned we were both seasoned and experienced enough to know what we were doing, making lengthy courtship unnecessary. She seemed to be a forthright, what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of person, so I had no qualms about

prolonged pre-marital scrutiny, vetting, or “due diligence”, and the feeling was evidently mutual.

She and her children inhabited a neglected farm house on acreage which overwhelmed her both financially and logistically after her divorce in 2000 from their father. Our original plan was for her to unload it and downsize into the duplex I had been renting, perhaps buying the duplex, or some other mutually agreeable place, later. But when we began preparing the house for sale, I realized how important it had been to her and her kids, and felt ashamed to uproot them just because their mom had married me. So I changed my mind and decided to keep the house and property for her and her kids' sake, eventually co-signing on a new mortgage to raise capital for repairs and emergencies after doing my best to bootstrap-finance its care.

(I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that I used some of the refi money to put a new engine in my car and pay some back taxes incurred while traveling frequently to attend to my son the first few years [2001-2004] after his mother had moved him out of state. I thought my wife and I mutually consented to this arrangement, but learned later that she resented it. I'm paying her back, and my goal is to finish repaying her by the summer. Meanwhile, I provided all of the income I could muster to help keep and maintain the home for her and her children, much more than was used for the car and taxes.)

In our first year of marriage – 2006 - all vital utilities (electricity, water, septic) failed, and the roof leaked. In an unplanned move, she also quit her job on the pretexts that working in a moldy classroom was harming her health; and that her son, who attended the same school where she was teaching, was having bully problems.

The idea was for her to be a stay-at-home mom and home-school him, and for me to play the man, step up to the plate and make the whole thing work financially somehow since, after all, I am in the business of creating financial solutions. When I struggled or failed to do so, I reviled myself for being a failure and a hypocrite. And instead of encouraging, she agreed, reviling me also.

So between major maintenance issues and the financial strain of both decreased income and increased expenses, it was a pretty stressful first year – not the best way to launch a marriage.

In 2007, I became clinically depressed – a new experience for me (**Lesson #4**). The main thing that depressed me was shame over the adultery of marrying a divorced woman, for which I had asked, and not received, guidance from the church. My conscience tormented me, causing me to brood by day, talk in my sleep by night, suffer heart palpitations, and bleed internally. It was an unresolved issue that hounded me, and in my worse moments I interpreted the difficulties of 2006 as divine judgment. By the fall of 2007 I confessed this concern outwardly to my priest and my wife, offending her further, despite my attempts to explain that I still wanted and loved her.

What also depressed me was the realization that she had been distorting details about her past, particularly concerning her innocence and her ex-husband's guilt. I learned she was not as innocent, nor was he as guilty, as she had represented. And I reasoned to myself, if she is capable of misrepresenting the nature of her relationship with him, she might also do likewise with me some day – which has indeed since happened.

To me, our marriage felt like a poker game, like being married to a stranger. She and her children were secretive, even sneaky, around me; so I felt as though I were living the Biblical “a man's enemies shall be members of his own household” scenario (Micah 7:6, Matt. 10:36). Of course in a depressed state I became irritable, exacerbating everyone's secrecy tendencies and providing fodder for subsequent abuse accusations.

I learned that the difference between depression and sorrow is that with depression, one loses one's will to live and interest in ordinary joys (**Lesson #5**). Thank God, I am recovering from this depression and will

write more about how I recovered below (see Chapter 6).

Meanwhile the children were getting older. One night in the fall of 2007 her now seventeen-year-old daughter raised a ruckus with her brother late one night after their mom, who was having trouble sleeping from stress, had gone to bed. I rebuked the kids for being inconsiderate of their mother, ordering them to stop it and go to bed.

A couple of days later, their dad removed them from the house, saying he believed I was a threat to his kids and that he wouldn't return them until I was out of the house. Finding myself accused of being a danger to children, and having seen what happens to men in that position, I arranged an apartment/office and vacated the premises.

Of course my wife was upset (as I also was); she felt abandoned. She became enraged and malicious and has been ever since, despite my innumerable attempts to assure her that I was not abandoning her, but protecting myself from false accusations of endangering kids.

After the three days necessary to move, I immediately turned my attention to reconciliation, proposing to use the apartment as an office. In January we attempted reunion but by the end of the month she announced she felt cold and asked me to leave. Since then she has become increasingly distant, to the point that she now insists on absolutely no contact.

In the spring and summer of this year, we counseled with our priest and two therapists. But by late August she had abandoned counseling. Over the course of this year, she has changed from professing her undying love in the late winter to alleging that our sexual relationship was not consensual, accusing me of misogyny, abuse, and mental illness. She threatens a no-contact order if I pursue reconciliation any further.

Yet she claims not to want a divorce “out of respect for the sacrament” which sounds pious enough, to be sure, but which I suspect has at its root the desire to save face, or pride. Lately she has been saying she wants to stay married but separated with no contact for one and a half years (until her daughter is out of the house and in college), then five years (a nice round number, I suppose), then seven years (a Biblical number of completion; evidently an acquaintance whom she esteems a “prophet” gave her a “Word from the Lord” that I would take that long to become “acceptable”). Meanwhile she has also expressed willingness to sign or do whatever is necessary to get an ecclesiastical divorce. So her behavior is all over the map.

The counselor advised me I was “an Agape man married to an Eros woman” (Agape is selfless, divine love; Eros is self-serving love), and flatly advised me to divorce her. He also advised me that my wife was suffering from a form of depression called Dysthymia which is low-grade, chronic, and long-term. It causes one to diminish fortune and augment misfortune, to be pessimistic and cynical. Since he is Roman Catholic, I was shocked to receive such unequivocal, “un-Catholic” advice, and have since been wrestling with whether to accept it.

With both my first and second wives, I pursued reconciliation years after divorce was final. By now, one would hope that I'd have a little better ability to discern when to quit. With my first wife, I made the mistake of persisting so doggedly that my name is now listed permanently at the King County Superior Court web site under “Domestic Violence” since persistent communication (a.k.a “harassment”) is regarded as its predictor.

On the advice of counselors, clergy, and family, I now find myself in the position of considering petitioning for divorce, something I've never believed in or done before. It is a difficult decision that causes me sleepless nights and heart palpitations. (Thankfully, however, the internal bleeding has subsided.)

So far I have clung to the memory of how she used to be – friendly, optimistic, humble, affectionate, spiritual, etc. - believing in faith that the woman I thought I knew still exists in the recesses of her heart. But she flatly tells me that woman is “dead.”

In retrospect, this experience has been Proverbial (I now advise my son to read one chapter the Proverbs daily – **Lesson #6**), and I feel ashamed of how I failed to heed the obvious clues. The priest who married us now announces that divorce is inevitable and has essentially ordered me to stop pursuing reconciliation, so I am asking him for guidance on getting an ecclesiastical divorce.

I still love my wife and have recently tried to communicate to her how I believe it is possible to redeem our situation and create a positive future, but she deletes my e-mails without reading them, burns my letters, won't answer the phone, and has repeatedly threatened to impose a no-contact restraining order.

I have consulted with people who have known her much longer than I, and learned that the behavior I am experiencing now is consistent with her long-term pattern, the “real her” (**Lesson #7**). In retrospect I realize how through better due diligence and longer courtship, I could have learned and avoided this misfortune.

Since I still love her, want the best for her, and have seen how good and beautiful she can be, I am reluctant to give up. But since contact is impossible and the priest who married us says divorce is inevitable, I am pretty much resigned to being divorced by the summer.

In this whole experience, I have learned what “abuse” really is, because I was accused of it, took the accusation seriously, and did some research, work, and hard prayer in a sincere effort to repent. It's a Latin word meaning “use up” or deplete (**Lesson #8**). Physical abuse is most obvious, but most, and the worst, abuse isn't physical. Physical wounds heal in a few months, but spiritual, emotional, and mental wounds sometimes never heal.

I have learned that while men are more predisposed toward physical abuse because they're bigger and stronger, women are more predisposed toward the non-physical, and more harmful, forms of abuse, to compensate for their lack of size and strength, and because their verbal skills are commonly more highly developed than men's.

One form of mental abuse I learned about in this experience is called “Gaslighting” from an old Ingrid Bergman movie about a woman who is driven insane by a man who adjusts the lighting in her house, then tells her she's just imagining things when she asks whether the lighting has changed. Gaslighting is a form of mental abuse that causes people to doubt their perceptions and ultimately their sanity.

Other forms of abuse I've experienced include belittling, reviling, sarcasm, deprivation of affection or touch, and shunning. I do not disclose this to elicit sympathy or pity, nor to criticize my wife, but to simply share that it has been quite the learning experience, one that has sensitized me to the issue and aroused compassion in me for other abuse sufferers, including her; for the cycle of abuse perpetuates because today's victim becomes tomorrow's perpetrator (**Lesson #9**).

I've learned that a choice men must make facing the issue of abuse is whether to define it narrowly (strictly physical) or broadly. Many men argue for the narrow definition, trying to minimize the abuse issue by protesting that its definition has become so broad as to be meaningless. Having studied the issue at length this past year, and having experienced intangible abuse, I disagree. I've chosen to embrace the broad definition, because I understand there are many intangible ways of “using up”, and that they're the most

harmful.

Embracing the broad definition is actually edifying because for every vice, there's an opposing virtue. After extensive prayer, fasting, and prostrations about the matter, a list of both vices and virtues came to me, which you will find attached with this letter ("Defining and Confronting Abuse"). I have since resolved to pursue the virtues. Note that abuse can be committed both by commission or omission. It isn't enough to refrain from the vices. One must also pursue the virtues.

I've also learned about mental disorders (**Lesson #10**) including Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). My wife accused me of having OCD or OCPD (Obsessive Compulsive *Personality* Disorder), so I took the accusation seriously and underwent some therapy for it.

OCD is kind of funny. The TV series "Monk" does a great job of showing how. I learned that there are obsessions, which are beliefs, and compulsions, which are behaviors intended to address those beliefs. So compulsive hand-washing is intended to address the belief that germs are everywhere and out to get us, while constant checking is intended to address the belief that calamity is about to strike. Most obsessions are concerned with harm or loss. Behind every compulsion is an obsession, so the key to solving the compulsion is to address the obsession behind it. This can be difficult because while compulsions are tangible, obsessions (beliefs) are not. They're invisible ideas floating around inside somebody's head.

In my experience, OCD is an occupational hazard of military and financial work, which are both very detail-oriented and concerned with being right, preventing loss, and avoiding harm. Add Orthodox Christianity to the mix, and you have what my therapist calls "Duck Soup." Studying OCD has helped me be relaxed, aware, and have a sense of humor about it all.

But my wife saw no humor in it. Because of my OCD tendencies I was preoccupied with correctness, order, closure, safety, and cleanliness. In my defense I would protest that I was dealing with a neglected house, a failed septic system, safety hazards like water, electricity, and chain saw work, and a neighborhood with a convicted burglar across the street, a mental institution next door, and child molesters down the block and around the corner, necessitating vigilance about locking doors and windows.

Through therapy I learned that I have four obsessions:

- discerning truth;
- preventing loss;
- preventing harm; and
- promoting communion.

They're the causes of whatever compulsion I may manifest, and I'm at peace with them. Therapy has just helped me be aware of them, be less compulsive and more gentle in how I pursue them, and maintain a sense of humor about it all.

I studied Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) because people who have known my wife much longer than I, believe she has it. Among other things, Borderlines project their issues onto others, distort facts to fit their feelings, "split" people by either idealizing or despising them with no tolerance for human frailty, fear abandonment, display inappropriate, intense anger, have weak identities, and "cry wolf", employing a victim mentality.

I learned that our culture is a kind of toxic soup that causes BPD because it is so transient, rootless, dynamic,

mobile, and contemporary, lacking a sense of groundedness, rootedness, or tradition, glorifying emotion and minimizing personal responsibility – making excuses, crying wolf, and passing the buck.

One thing I love about my wife is that she actively seeks tradition - for good reason, since she had so little of it in her childhood and early adulthood. She's aware of her need for it. A lot of people aren't. I conclude that we should not be surprised by those who demonstrate BPD symptoms; we should be surprised by those who **don't!** So again, learning about BPD has taught me understanding and compassion.

The BPD motto is, "I hate you – don't leave me." There's a book about it by that title, one of several I read this year. It's certainly what's happening here: "I want no contact with you, and I don't want a divorce."

The sad thing about BPD is, it's rarely cured. Our therapist has called curing BPD "the impossible dream." When cures happen, it's because the BPD sufferer takes full ownership of the problem and works hard on healing, which my wife refuses to do. A healthy, robust spiritual life also helps.

At any rate, it would appear I will be divorced by the summer. If she is sincere (which I doubt) about opening back up seven years from now – what is that, 2015? - then I'll be open too if I'm not otherwise occupied. She has asked me to get on with my life, so I suppose I shall. But as I write, I'm still in the contemplating stage; I haven't reached a decision yet.

I consider waiting the seven years – after all, I was not seeking a wife in the first place, I had resolved to remain solitary until Johann was eighteen, then decide whether to choose marriage or monasticism. But since my wife surprised me by being a sort of ready-made mother as it were, I figured it would be in his best interests to marry her while he was still a child. He sure loves her, and got along pretty well with her kids.

Since she has proven to be so changeable, I know I can not rely on any of her assurances or predictions. It seems better to me to close the wound and let it heal. But I'm perfectly open to saying hello in 2015 and seeing what happens. I've seen people divorce and remarry each other before; it happens. Anything is possible.

It makes no sense to me, though, to carry a ring around on my finger that represents no relationship. I carried a torch for my first wife until she got me permanently listed on the King County Superior Court web site; I carried a torch for the second for nine years after she had divorced me; I figure I should end my torch-carrying days and accept things as they are, as I've also been advised by clergy, family, and friends.

In his book Redemptive Divorce, Chuck Swindoll's son-in-law Mark Gaither points out that a divorce decree is like a death certificate: it's simply a public acceptance of what already is. Just as the death certificate does not cause death, neither does the decree cause divorce. By insisting on indefinite separation, abandoning counsel, and forbidding contact, my wife has divorced me. To arrange a decree simply acknowledges that which already is.

The overall lesson (**Lesson #11**) I have learned in all of this – from all three wives – is that I have always been picked. At age 45, I honestly do not know what it is like to choose a woman. I have always let them choose me because it was easier, with no risk of rejection – and therefore cowardly. It has also always been a recipe for disaster, for my experience has consistently been that if a woman does not feel prized, she eventually self-destructs. It is impossible for her to be prized if she is the one doing the picking. I feel this is a vital lesson for both men and women, especially in modern times.

I will write more about this further on in my discussion of Scandinavian folk dance.

I wrote to my son at length about this since he is on the cusp of becoming a man and relating to women himself, but in a nutshell what I have come to realize is that *women do themselves a disservice by being forward*. They would be better off working on becoming adorable by beautifying themselves, both inside and out, than working on seizing initiative.

In their heart of hearts – whether they admit it or not, whether they are aware of it at the time or not – they need to be prized. They need to know that their men think they're fabulous. When they take the initiative, they rob their men of the excitement and risk of the chase, which builds their courage, and they rob themselves of the opportunity to be prized.

So I conclude that it is a mistake for women to take the initiative, and it is a mistake for men to yield it. In a post-feminist, egalitarian society that places such a high priority on empowering women, we often miss this important point, but I find it's still true; and I don't suppose that placing initiative where it belongs disempowers women; quite the contrary, the argument could be made that it gives them more power by putting them in the position of being truly esteemed. It's a paradox.

All my life, surprised and flattered by forward women, I have made the mistake of yielding initiative. I will do so no longer; I've learned my lesson. If I ever get involved with a woman again, I will choose her, and she will know without a shadow of a doubt that I think she is absolutely wonderful because I chose her; and this could happen with my wife in 2015, or whenever. With God all things are possible. Only time will tell.

As an afterthought, I should mention how I learned from my wife that, according to her, “Every Mother's Dream” is to be totally supported financially by her husband, so that she can devote her undivided attention to loving her children (**Lesson #12**). Again, in our egalitarian, post-feminist surroundings, this is a lesson that is totally lost on many of us, having been derided in Betty Friedan's book The Feminine Mystique, published the same year I was born (1963).

For my entire lifetime, one could say that the stay-at-home mom model has been devalued, derided, even dismantled in the way that we raise, educate, and otherwise prepare our children for the future. This model places a heavy financial burden on men, but I can testify from my professional experience working with married couples that the happiest wives live it. I can also testify that the husbands are also the happiest because of the enormous sense of accomplishment, self-respect, and satisfaction they enjoy knowing they succeeded at achieving what seems to many to be a daunting goal, and seeing their wives and children thrive.

Chapter 4 - On Fatherhood: Johann News

In view of the disappointing outcome, I regret how courting in 2005 and marrying in 2006 distracted me from my son. I visited and wrote to him less. In 2004 I wrote him 31 letters; in 2005, 21; in 2006, five; in 2007, six; and 2008 year to date, ten. Those were important ages too, ages ten through fourteen. He was such a good sport about the marriage; I made sure to get his blessing before proceeding, and he was really looking forward to having an intact family.

But the reality proved much different than the dream. It quickly became evident that my step kids were determined to follow a pecking order, with him at the bottom – an order which I firmly opposed, but the pecking order tendency became another challenge against which I had to keep vigil, and added to the other tensions we struggled to manage.

I suppose a silver lining on the cloud of separation, even though I didn't want it and strove to end it as soon as possible, is that it spared Johann further exposure to this pecking order tendency. He got along great with his youngest stepbrother who was his same age, which isn't hard for boys to do when their default activity is video games. But I could tell when they interacted more directly, at a more substantive level, that the quality of their characters and the astuteness of their souls were very different, and that these differences would become more stark with the passage of time. The three older step-siblings were usually gone or busy, so from his point of view there was not much to lose; but he is grieved to have lost a brother, his stepmother whom he dearly loved, a home, and the hope of having an intact family.

My wife has intimated in the past that somehow she'd like to make it possible for the boys to get together, but this seems impracticable and unsustainable to me given how schismatic she is determined to be. From my point of view if there is no marriage then there's no point in cultivating the rest of the relationships. It would be like a wheel with no axle.

He has been kind and sympathetic to me during this grievous, regrettable year; he has watched his daddy sob and struggle under grief to focus and perform simple tasks. With his mother's support and help, I am pleased that he has managed to keep his own composure, and stay focused on his business – school, homework, after school activities, and friends.

Now fourteen, he appears to be becoming a gentleman and a scholar. He's blessed to be receiving a private Christian education that includes subjects often neglected in the public schools like grammar, rhetoric, logic, classics, and history. I understand he attends an "Omnibus" class that integrates all of them, in which he's performing very well.

Since he was seven years old, I've written regularly to him, typically filling a three-ring binder in a year with letters. So for half his lifetime now, he has been accustomed to receiving regular letters from his father. In those letters I have pretty much poured out my heart to him. While striving to keep the content age-appropriate, I have also tried to be thorough and honest. A typical letter would average 5-10 single spaced pages. This archive has become a sort of interactive journal for both of us, and has made literature personally relevant to him. In those letters I have tried to philosophize and encourage him to do the same. Now that he's in an educational environment that encourages philosophy, I am pleased to watch him flourish. Lately he has been reading Homer and writing eloquent reports. His grammar is impeccable. Unlike many adults, he maintains clear distinctions between adjectives and adverbs, subjects and objects. I have been diligent to cultivate his discernment and now that he has reached his "age of reason", it appears as though that effort is paying off.

Yet he's no snob. Quite the contrary, since he has experienced more sorrow and loss than any child should, he has become extraordinarily sympathetic and compassionate to all creatures. He is personable, makes friends easily, and relates well to people of all ages and backgrounds. Adults commonly remark how uncommonly well he relates to them, looking them straight in the eye and engaging on their level, and on how his company is so pleasant.

He is musical. I used to sing to him in his mother's womb, played the piano while wearing him sleeping in a backpack, took him with me to musical rehearsals and performances, and wrote and performed a percussion ensemble about his birth called "Johann's Welcome." He has experimented with percussion, keyboard, and trumpet, and sings very clearly and in tune.

He is also athletic, receiving excellent tennis training in Hawaii.

And he is astute. If I make a misstatement of fact, he is quick to correct me. When we do spiritual devotions, he pays close attention and usually asks an intelligent question or makes an astute observation.

He is thoughtful and considerate. It seems unusual to me that children would remember their parents' birthdays, usually it is the other way around. But for the past few years he has been careful to call on his own initiative the morning of my birthday and sing to me.

I've encouraged him to imagine, make plans, and accomplish them. In 2001 we designed and built a tree house thirty feet high, made mostly of trees, in trees. In the end of 2006 it came down during a violent winter wind storm, but for several years we had some great times up there with photographs to prove it. I'll never forget the expression on his face after his first ascent. In the late 1990's I made a working hovercraft for him designed to look like a flying saucer (maybe you're familiar with "Spaceman Spiff" from the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip?). It was powered with a leaf blower, and the body was made of two wading pools with a plexiglass pastry cover for the cockpit.

Now if you were to ask him what he wants to be when he grows up, the answer is likely to be "architect" or "engineer."

I hope that some day soon he and I will be able to live together or much closer than we are now. Still reeling from the events of the past couple of years and not knowing their exact implications for the future, my vision of how that would work is cloudy at the moment, but I am determined to clarify it. Regardless, I am confident that in the long run he and I will be best friends, and I smile on the future.

Chapter 5 – On Work and the Economy

I'm in my thirteenth year operating my Economics practice, Making End\$ Meet (www.makinendsmeet.com).

What can I tell you about it? I've helped hundreds of people over the years. I've seen some successes and some failures. I've learned progress does not happen in a regular, linear way. People will plod along for years in a chronic state of frustration, held hostage by their own habits and beliefs. They're often ambivalent. They'll set goals, but not really take them seriously.

Tipping Points. Then one day they'll experience a change. Perhaps it's a shift in staffing, or a crisis, or they just get sick and tired of being sick and tired. But when change occurs, it happens in fits and spurts. I find I have to watch for those moments, then strike while the iron is hot. They're impossible to schedule, and hard to predict. It's kind of like working with a log jam. In his book The Tipping Point, Malcom Gladwell does a good job of explaining how this works. I find I am in the business of noticing tipping points and acting on them.

To give you a tangible example, the monastery was at a tipping point when my friends and I solved their foundation problem. After two years of frustration dealing with their half-finished, sagging buildings, they were very discouraged. Then a few jacks-of-all-trades, masters-of-none layman show up, help out for ten days or so, and everything's different, and on a positive trend. I find financial improvements work similarly.

Heart. But as I wrote above in the men's choir discussion, I am frustrated, and wondering whether to press on or make a change. I get tired of working with symptoms, consequences, and ambivalence. I yearn to work more with root causes, at the heart level, where ambivalence can be overcome. Oddly, sometimes it seems to me that hymnody is more practical than financial work, because it goes straight to the heart, where economic motives, as well as all the others, are born.

My wife will tell you, I don't make enough money. I'm ambivalent too. I haven't raised my rates in ten years, and I've been so beset by this or that distraction that I keep telling myself, if I could only put this latest distraction behind me, I can make more money without increasing my rates. I seem to be more interested in “laying up my treasures in heaven” as the Biblical saying goes. I don't want to raise my rates because I don't want to price myself out of reach of those who need me the most. Maybe I'm wrong, but I am determined to stay the course and increase my income by helping more people.

Remote Collaboration Tools. This year, due to laziness and the cost of gas, I've made more use of remote collaboration techniques and tools and web-based software. Most of my clients are now registered with logmein.com so I can see their computers from my office and help them with their questions without having to go anywhere. Several of them have used QuickBooks Online with excellent results. Last spring I uploaded my prospecting data to freecrm.com (CRM stands for Customer Relationship Management) and haven't looked back. Now I can update and work with client and prospect records from anywhere. Having struggled with depression this year while trying unsuccessfully to reconcile with my wife, it was really helpful to have all my prospecting data organized on the CRM program. It liberated me to let go and grieve without worrying about losing track of important facts, figures, commitments, and people.

Typical Work. Most of my work is about responding to the difference between desired and actual results. Desired results are expressed with my clients' long term plans and shorter term budgets, while actual results are measured with their accounting systems. I help people understand their financial statements, especially the cause-effect relationships between income and expenses on the one hand, and assets and liabilities on the other.

Sometimes I get involved in special project work like helping people get caught up filing tax returns, start a business, facilitate ownership or management transitions, market their businesses for sale and otherwise develop exit strategies, or make high stakes decisions. Yesterday on the spur of the moment I wrote an amortization schedule for a real estate purchase contract when an owner decided to sell a piece of property and needed to know how much to cash out the party who sold it to him. Today I helped a client understand at what interest rate it would make sense to refinance a Canadian mortgage in American dollars, after her American bank made a spur-of-the-moment refinance offer.

Every April since 1997, I've been writing a mutual fund report that isolates those funds performing at the top 1% of the market over both the long-run and the short-run, accompanied by a short newsletter. Except for the dot-com bust of 2000, most years have been full of good news. The April 2009 report should be most interesting. If you'd like a copy, let me know.

The Importance of Precise Language. I use language to translate financial goals and results into terms ordinary people can understand. In so doing, especially when working with cause-effect dynamics, I find it necessary to use very precise language that also makes clear cause-effect distinctions. Consequently I've become a real stickler about grammar – not to be a snob or a jerk, but because I find it's necessary to help people and otherwise do my job.

Explaining Cause and Effect: Pronouns, Subjects and Objects. For example, here's a little pronoun chart I keep inside my head and use whenever I'm trying to explain cause and effect:

<i>Subject (Cause)</i>	<i>Object (Effect)</i>
I	Me
He	Him
She	Her
They	Them
We	Us
Who	Whom

Obviously if you're in the business of helping people understand the cause-effect dynamics that are affecting or even controlling their lives, as I am, it's necessary to use the right labels to distinguish between cause and effect. Unfortunately, in common usage these distinctions have become obscured.

The classic sentence used to show why the subject/object distinction matters is, “The dog bit the boy.” One would be surprised to read, “The boy bit the dog.” Obviously the dog is the subject, it's the one doing the biting; the boy is the object.

But when we get into pronouns, it becomes less clear. Every day I hear professional speakers mess it up. Today I heard someone call in to a radio program saying, “Me and my husband just bought a new truck.” She's using the object form of the first person (“Me”) to describe who bought the truck, when she is obviously the subject. She bought the truck, the truck didn't buy her. On more careful reflection it becomes obvious that the correct way to describe what they did would be, “My husband and I just bought a new truck.”

Why do people do this? I have no clue. I have trouble thinking when it would ever be correct to begin a sentence with “Me.” Can you? But people do it all the time.

Am I just picking nits here, or does this really matter somehow?

I would submit that people who have trouble distinguishing between cause and effect in their own minds have even more trouble distinguishing between cause and effect in their environments, where driving forces are more varied, complex, and difficult to understand. I would further submit that failure to understand cause-effect relationships is what has caused the current global credit crisis, and many other problems that plague us. So as I age, I'm becoming increasingly convinced that *the best way to solve big world problems is to begin with ourselves, since we are all we can really control; and often, since thoughts are the seeds of action, that means un-scrambling our own minds, correcting our language, since words are the pegs on which we hang our ideas.*

This is why it seems to me that grammar matters. It isn't about being a nit-picking control freak, jerk, or snob; it's about genuine care for the human race.

Expressing Imperatives. Another area of difficulty I encounter is in how we express imperatives. I'm in the business of helping people make important, consequential decisions. But for some reason – I suspect it's cowardice, fear of confrontation, or not wanting to seem bossy – many are reluctant to own authority, assume command, employ the word “must”, and otherwise carry out a decision.

Here's a letter to the editor of the local newspaper I wrote three and a half years ago on the subject:

“As I survey today's letters to the editor and other news, I am again reminded how we have lost our imperative voice. Expressing "must" has become a struggle for a lot of us because we have no absolute grounds of authority. Since we have given up our free speech rights in public religious discourse, we have no shared understanding of the nature or will of God. Without shared absolute principles, decision making has become both paralyzed and polarized in many arenas - public and private, large and small.

Consequently we shirk our own authority, sometimes to the ridiculous extreme of ascribing "needs" to inanimate objects. As a small example, instead of saying, "Johnny, take out the garbage" a parent might instead say, "Johnny, the garbage needs to be taken out."

Huh? Since when did garbage have "needs"? One might also say that Lake Whatcom "needs" to be clean, the jail "needs" to grow, certain weapons "need" to be banned, and so on.

All of this is absurd and leaves us vulnerable to avoidable harm and expense. How can we reclaim our imperative voice?”

Another twist I've seen – often a manipulation ploy perpetrated by scoundrels who have the opposite problem of wanting more authority than really belongs to them by trying to steal the imperative from those to whom it truly belongs – is ascribing needs to others.

Have you ever had someone tell you what you need? Beware. You're probably being manipulated. Only you know what you need, and only I know what I need. It would be far better for each of us to speak for our own

needs, and to have the courage to own that we are assuming command, when we must, instead of projecting contrived “needs” onto others.

Having served a combined total of eight years in the military – three of which were active duty Marine Corps – I have no problem with giving or obeying orders, working within a command structure, and expressing imperatives without trying to conceal them behind fictitious “needs.” I recognize the advantages of command to both superiors and subordinates. But I find a lot of us don't, and that trying to weasel our ways around imperatives only gets us in trouble. I have concluded that it's better to muster the courage to own and wield authority outright, and let the chips fall where they may.

Arriving at Memorable and Compelling Conclusions. Back in the day, we tried not to dangle prepositions. But we forgot why avoiding dangling mattered, and quit. Now dangling is hip and common. Professional speakers like radio personalities and newscasters dangle all the time.

(On reflection, by definition prepositions must be pre-positioned, or positioned before something, not after. The way we use them now, we might as well re-name them “postpositions.”)

Lately, I've realized why they matter. Again, it isn't about being a nit-picking, sociopathic control freak, snob, or jerk.

(Last year I gave my step-daughter a funny birthday card with a picture on the cover of one girl speaking to another. The one asked the other, “Where's your birthday party at?” The other responded, “Don't end your sentence with a preposition.” Inside the card, the first retorted, “Where's your birthday party at, ***bitch***?” This is the typically hostile response to issues of grammar and style.)

But consider this: beginnings and endings are most memorable, right? Endings are, well, ***conclusive***. So if you want to communicate effectively and persuasively, wouldn't it make sense to create strong, memorable conclusions?

Put another way, do you care that we live in a divided country? Where would you rather live: The United States of America, or the Divided States of America – the [U.S.A.](#), or the [D.S.A.](#)?

Somehow, we need to get it together. We need to regain our way. I am convinced one way of doing so is in how we communicate with each other. We need to wake up, get back in touch with who we truly are and truly believe, and express what we learn to each other in bold, powerful, conclusive ways. Among other things, that means composing strong sentences that begin and conclude memorably, by putting prepositions *before* their objects - where, by definition, they belong.

Distinguishing Perception from Reality.

Borderline Personality Disorder. As I mentioned above in Chapter 3, Lesson 10 on mental disorders, I learned that our culture is a toxic soup that produces Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), and that we should not be surprised by those who demonstrate BPD symptoms; we should be surprised by those who don't. In a sense, BPD has become “normal.” As Saint Anthony the Great, founder of both Eastern and Western monasticism once said, “A time is coming when people will go mad and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying, 'You are mad, you are not like us.'”

One BPD symptom is distorting facts to fit feelings. I'd like to elaborate a little on this in the contexts of both

faith and work, for I find the two inseparable.

Distinguishing Perception from Reality In the Context of Faith

Nihilism. In the 2000-2002 Advent Letter I wrote of Nihilism: the belief that nothing exists, matters, or can be known. Father Seraphim Rose, an Orthodox priest-monk who reposed in 1982 and is now a candidate for sainthood, wrote hundreds of pages on the subject, a portion of which was posthumously published in the form of the book Nihilism: The Root of the Revolution of the Modern Age, which I mentioned in the 2000-2002 letter. He wrote this essay in 1962, one year before both Friedan's Feminine Mystique and I were born.

His realizations about Nihilism shaped his journey toward Orthodox Christianity, for they forced him to become objective about theology and ecclesiology, as I allude in my own experience on page four. In his case, he was raised Episcopalian, and eventually asked himself whether his perception of ecclesiology matched reality.

In other words, he asked himself, “The Episcopal Church seems to be The Church to me, because I’m used to it. But is it The Church, really?” By practicing the Queen of the Sciences, Theology – through objective scientific research – he arrived at his answer - “no” - converted, and became a heroic pioneer for Orthodox Christianity and monasticism in America.

Nihilism asserts that reality does not exist. It asserts that there is no difference between perception and reality. It asserts that perception **IS** reality, or in the language of BPD, that feelings **ARE** facts. Under Nihilism it is impossible to mistake or lie, since there is no reality to mistake or truth to distort. Political and advertising campaigns are routinely based on this belief. In places like Wall Street, Washington D.C., and academe, albeit perhaps unspoken, it has become a reigning premise.

And in the context of mental health, insofar as “Psychosis” is defined as a loss of contact with reality, if reality does not exist, then neither does Psychosis. Pretty scary, huh? Thus Nihilism is the precursor to Psychosis, or insanity. This is why it must be seriously confronted and defeated.

I suppose another silver lining on the cloud of this recession is that it is absolute proof that reality **DOES** exist, and that it is definitely **DIFFERENT** than perception, for our leading economists and investment managers failed to perceive it, and it happened anyway. As Chuck Colson once said, “Arithmetic is the last bastion of objective reality.”

Obviously according to ordinary experience like bank accounts and traffic lights, Nihilism is false. Nonetheless, it has insidiously infected our culture, our ideas, and – consequentially – our language. Nihilism is the destruction of the objective, and the triumph of the subjective. It is the subjectification of everything, and an assault on authentic Philosophy.

This assault manifests in our language and accounts for confusion about cause and effect, about parts of speech like subjects and objects, as I demonstrate on page 25, and about questions and answers, as I will show in a moment. For according to Nihilism, there are no answers.

The Salvific Distinction Between Guilt and Shame. In more philosophical jargon, Nihilism destroys the distinction between Ontology (being) and Perception (feeling). For me, through experiences I have had with wives, friends, family, counselors, and clergy, the most striking example of this destruction is the distinction between guilt and shame. I have seen it wreak havoc on countless lives; and in the second half of my own, I

am interested in working to relieve it.

Bearing in mind the being/feeling distinction, I would offer that guilt is a state of being, while shame is a state of feeling.

Think about that for a moment: “Guilt is a state of being. Shame is an emotion.”

Now reflect on the innumerable times you have read, heard, and and probably talked about “feeling guilty.”

Contrast that with what happens in a courtroom verdict: the judge does not say “You feel guilty.” (That would sound absurd, wouldn't it?) The judge says, “You **ARE** guilty.”

So over the past forty-five years of living, the distinction I have come to respect between guilt and shame, is that guilt is a state of being while shame is an emotion. It isn't possible to “feel” guilty, even though we read, hear, and say it all the time. One can only **BE** guilty or **BE** innocent. How we **FEEL** about our guilt or innocence is another question.

Shame, on the other hand, is an emotion, which, I would submit, sane people associate with guilt, like this:

“I **feel** ashamed because I **am** guilty.”

or,

“I **feel** shameless because I **am** innocent.”

Psychosis muddles this distinction. BPD tactics like Gaslighting and Projection erode it. Prisons are full of shameless guilty people, and therapists' offices contain their share of ashamed innocent people. Sanity is all about restoring the distinction, aligning perception with reality: helping the guilty feel the shame that leads to repentance, and relieving the innocent of the shame that unnecessarily burdens them.

In the context of Advent and Christmas, I believe this distinction makes all the difference. It is what makes Jesus significant, for ultimately, we are all guilty of something, whether we feel ashamed or not. Some of us feel ashamed, others don't. Regardless, in His love, mercy, grace, and compassion, He did what He did, and does what He does, for everyone.

But salvation – both in this world, and the next – depends entirely on whether we admit that we are guilty and in need of His forgiveness, and choose to accept it. To get to the point of admitting our guilt and becoming eligible for salvation, at some point we have to face the fact that our emotions might not match our state of being, that we might **be** guilty yet **feel** shameless. Therefore, I have arrived at the conclusion that the distinction between perception and reality – between shame and guilt – is eschatologically significant. It could make the difference between Heaven and Hell.

My friends in the clergy and counseling professions, this is why I entreat you not to use the two terms interchangeably, banishing from your thought and speech this notion of “feeling guilty.” One can only **BE** guilty; and **FEELING** shame for guilt is the key to salvation.

In Biblical language, this shame I am trying to describe and distinguish from guilt, is called “Godly sorrow that leads to repentance.” It is salvific, and it is the purpose of Advent, a kind of Winter Lent in which we fast, pray, and prepare our hearts for the nativity of our Savior: He who saves us from our guilt, offering us

freedom, communion, and eternal life.

In view of all of this, I should also mention that my wife and I attended a seminar by a globally renowned Orthodox theologian and author, a Greek bishop by the name of Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, a prolific author of more than sixty books. In this seminar on repentance or “Metanoia” which literally means “change of heart”, he pointed out that the closer we get to God, the more His light fills our hearts and minds.

The way he explained it (with a grin and a twinkle in his eye), it is kind of like watching a movie projected onto a screen inside the mind. The brighter the light becomes, the more vividly we notice our sins, and the more ashamed we feel. Thus the most holy people feel the most ashamed, since they see their sins most vividly; while the least holy people feel no shame and adamantly deny their guilt.

The irony is that the holiest people, while feeling profoundly ashamed, are guilty of very little, since in their illumination and vigilance they pluck the sprouts of sin from the gardens of their hearts while they are still at the thought stage, and do not get a chance to take root and grow into deeds. Meanwhile the least holy, while feeling shameless and denying guilt, harbor huge, deeply rooted trees of sin in the gardens of both their hearts where the sin originates, and in their deeds where it manifests.

This process of illumination, in which the light of God gradually intensifies in our hearts and minds and exposes sin at the thought stage before it has a chance to take root, is called “theosis” or “divinization” and when allowed to progress to its ultimate consequence, is the cause of sainthood. But again, the irony is that the holiest people, while guilty of almost nothing, feel the most ashamed because their “internal movie projector” is going “full blast”, so to speak. It is kind of funny, which is why I suppose he grinned and twinkled.

My Advent prayer for you, me, and everyone is that we would all experience this salvific illumination.

(Having discussed this in psychological, philosophical, and theological terms, I come back to the Disney cartoon “Pinocchio” which Johann and I used to watch together when he was a little guy. In the final analysis, one does not have to know about psychology, philosophy, or theology to make sense of all this. Little Jiminy Cricket says it all: it's all about conscience, the “Still Small Voice that tells the difference between right and wrong.” According to Wikipedia, “Jiminy Cricket” is a “polite expletive” for Jesus Christ.)



Seeking the Truth About Sex: What Does “Holy Sex” Look Like? After I thought I had finished this chat, as I let it “cool” before distributing it, I chanced across Cathi Hanauer's 2002 book *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage*. I found it while Googling “The Truth About Sex.”

I was researching the truth about sex because I am so tired of lies about it. How about you?

In my last confession I asked my priest how “Holy Sex” is supposed to look. (He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.) It's supposed to be this wonderful God-made thing that creates life and unites hearts, but it gets so perverted. I have trouble finding any images to which I can point for my son or myself and say, “See, there: that is how Holy Sex is supposed to look; that is how it works.”

The world assaults us with images of unholy sex; we know all too well how it looks. In a recent homily, my priest lamented how he feels assaulted by all the trashy tabloids on display in the grocery store checkout line, and so do I. He put it this way: “I can't even buy a gallon of milk without being assaulted!” Another priest, in a different homily, lamented that we see more “plumber's cracks” on young women at the mall than we see on plumbers!

Meanwhile hardcore pornography – not just pictures any more, but video, now that everyone has high speed Internet connections - is just a click away. I am particularly concerned now because the “industry” is allegedly targeting fourteen year old boys like my son, sending them unsolicited images on their electronic devices.

It seems to me the Father of Lies has totally commandeered sex, and I for one am fed up. In the latter half of my life, I am interested in reclaiming it. He has been ruining sex long enough. Given that it is God-designed and causes life, I conclude that we must tolerate the lies no longer. We must reclaim it. We must assume command.

In the same search I found a good web site, www.thetruthaboutsex.org. It's an apology for feminism by older women to younger women that is, believe it or not, man-friendly. The site promotes a documentary film that was supposed to have been produced in 2008. I would like to watch it but haven't yet figured out how to get it. Meanwhile there's some good material on the web site; I especially appreciate the “What If” page (<http://www.thetruthaboutsex.org/whatif.html>). It appears as though the film will do a masterful job of explaining how we got here, what happened over the years to ruin sex, and hopefully at least hint toward how Holy Sex looks.

But back to Hanauer's book: I chose to mention it here, at the end of the discussion about perception and reality, shame and guilt, and conscience because all 26 women in her book strike me as being both shameless and guilty. To the extent that they believe perception is reality, that feelings are facts, and that guilt is a feeling that can be un-felt, they're psychotic. Their consciences are broken. And Hanauer presents them as normal. Maybe they are.

Here's the premise of the book, from the inside front cover:

“Women today have more choices than at any time in history, yet many smart, ambitious, contemporary women are finding themselves angry, dissatisfied, stressed out. Why are they dissatisfied? And what do they really want? These questions form the premise of this passionate, provocative, funny, searingly honest collection of original essays in which twenty-six women writers invite readers into their lives, minds, and bedrooms to talk about the choices they've made, what's working, and what's not.”

I've sure wondered these questions. After spending my entire life witnessing the fruits of feminism (having been born the same year as The Feminine Mystique), my wife's “Every Mother's Dream” sure came as news to me, especially since she seemed happily employed while we were courting. So I was very interested in learning some answers.

I've read their stories and have learned that they've fornicated, committed adultery, and lied to their husbands while still trying to believe somehow that they're decent people. They're suffering "cognitive dissonance" between shamelessness and guilt, and finding it intolerably annoying.

I conclude that's why they're so angry. They're suffering because they're trapped in a suffocating prison, since the world has thrown away the key of shame, or "sorrow that leads to repentance." Without that key, they're stuck, and really mad about it.

But the author, who is also angry (that's why she decided to write the book, to try to understand her own anger) does not draw this conclusion. She doesn't draw any conclusion. She just lets each writer speak for herself – as if to say, "Here's what life is like inside this hellish prison. Key? What key?" And overall, I find that none of them draws conclusions. Instead, they write of nuance, complexity, contradiction, irony, and "balance", which my own wife has also often lauded.

(What is this "balance", really? I've arrived at the conclusion that it's really ambivalence, limbo, suspense, indecision, being stuck between two opinions; it's conclusion-starvation. It is lukewarm-ness. It reminds me of what we read in the Book of Revelation, how God wants us to be hot or cold; if we are lukewarm, He spits us out of His mouth in disgust – a frightening thought. As for me, do not give me balance; give me burning zeal.)

Unlike her and her subjects, I conclude they're trapped in a maddening prison of guilt by confusion about the distinction between it and shame. I feel sorry for them: stuck in chronic anger, ambivalent, undecided, psychotic. It's a living hell. If only their consciences worked. If only they could feel shame, the sorrow that leads to repentance, the key that unlocks the door to freedom. Then, maybe they might enjoy some resolution and some peace.

If the women in Hanauer's book are normal as she seems to imply, then it seems to me that women are suffering an epidemic of consciencelessness. I worry, grieve, and pray for them.

Sex and Motherhood: The Madonna-Whore Complex. The relationship between sex and motherhood seems odd to me, since the former causes the latter. The way we've perverted sex, portraying it in an unholy way, we create an unfair, maddening situation for women. In its unholy presentation, it appears totally incompatible with motherhood, like Britney Spears and the subsequent army of "pop tarts" who have followed her example. Britney is like an icon of the whole problem, poor girl: in and out of rehab, suffering serial meltdowns.

I feel compassion for them in their dilemma, stuck in what I've come to consider a "Madonna-Whore Complex." It's a setup for humiliation, frustration, self-loathing, and rage, which I have seen and experienced firsthand more than once. First we expect them – and, evidently, they expect themselves - to act like whores to conceive children. Then, once they're mothers, we expect them to be as good as the Mother of God. It seems to me a proper understanding of Holy Sex would resolve this tension for them (not to mention the men who love them and suffer through it with them).

The catalyst of the conscience is the Holy Spirit, whom Jiminy Cricket, [a.k.a.](#) Jesus Christ, calls "The Still Small Voice." At the beginning of every prayer and every service, the Orthodox pray this prayer to the Holy Spirit:

*“O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth,
Who are everywhere and fill all things,
Treasury of blessings and giver of life:
Come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity,
And save our souls, O Good One.”*

In other words, “God, make my conscience work. If it's broken, please heal it. Help me to feel Your salvific shame, the Godly sorrow that leads to repentance. Help me to clean up and wise up.”

In the Orthodox Church, the saint we uphold as the ultimate model of repentance near the conclusion of Lent was a sex addict. Surely it must be a man, right? After all, everybody knows men only want one thing. Don't women prefer chocolate?

Wrong. It's a woman. Her name is Saint Mary of Egypt. The account of her life in The Great Synaxaristes is 25 pages long. She lived in the 6th century. After a series of shipboard orgies, she went to Alexandria looking for more, following men wherever they went.

One of the places men went was church, so she tried to go in there, but was prevented by an invisible force. Long story short, she repented, spending most of her life in the desert. Now, among others, the Church sings this hymn to her:

*Thou who wast once obsessed with fornication
By repentance art now the Bride of Christ.
Thou didst lovingly imitate the life of the Angels
And annihilate demonic hosts by the Cross;
Thou art now a Bride in the Kingdom of heaven, O most chaste Mary.*

(But what is chastity? Is it abstinence? Not necessarily. For married people, it is Holy Sex. But if one is unmarried, as Mary was, then it is.)

Getting back to the pornography problem, it isn't just a male problem. First of all, according to the pornography recovery ministry Freedom Begins Here (<http://www.freedombeginshere.org>), 60% of Christian women admit significant struggles with lust, 34% of them look at pornography, 20% are addicted . . . and 70% keep their “cyber activities” secret. And that's just on the demand side.

On the supply side, consider all of the women who actively, willingly participate in the production of pornography. The roster is very, very long. Despite career alternatives feminism has offered, those who can, choose to make careers of having sex in front of a camera anyway. After all, pornography is available for men (and women) to consume because many, many women participate very actively(!) in its production. Again, according to Freedom Begins Here, “The pornography industry is larger than the revenues of the top technology companies combined: Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix and EarthLink”, and “Sex is the #1 thing people search for on the Internet.” (Hence one reason for including these remarks in this chapter about work and the economy.)

Clearly, they don't prefer chocolate. They enjoy sex just as much as men do, if not more. Such has certainly been my experience, in all three marriages. They're on both the supply and demand sides of the pornography industry. Clearly, the problem is not disinterest in sex; the problem is unholy sex, and the incredible humiliation and self-loathing women suffer as a result, especially after they become mothers, when they come face-to-face with the Madonna-Whore Complex.

When I ponder the entire spectrum of sexual possibilities for anyone, from porn star on one extreme to monastic on the other, with marriage somewhere in the middle – hopefully closer to monastic than porn star, but who knows? - I shudder with fright and shake my head in sorrow at all the poor souls, especially women, who have been misled toward the porn star direction, even within the context of marriage.

What happens when porn stars are no longer young and beautiful? What hope do they have for their futures? What hopes, if any, do they have for marriage and motherhood? The very question calls to mind the sad fates of the likes of Marilyn Monroe or Anna Nicole Smith.

And what about their ultimate future? Are you familiar with Pascal's Wager? If not, Google it some time. In Pascal's Wager, it seems to me they've chosen to bet that God does not exist. As Pascal pointed out, that is a losing bet: eschatologically speaking, if you win, you gain nothing; if you lose, you lose eternity. What about that?

Researching the question, I see that since my last Christmas Letter new encouraging developments have happened that pertain to this question. For example, one former porn star, a sort of modern-day Saint Mary of Egypt named Shelly Lubben (<http://www.shelleylubben.com>), founder of the Pink Cross Foundation, has launched a ministry to members of the sex industry. On her web site, she documents what really happens to them. The truth is so alarming that she and her husband devote their ministry to helping others get out.

I am mightily encouraged to learn of this, for I have always been mindful that sex industry workers are people too, made just as much in the image of God, and loved by Him, as anyone else.

I informed my priest about her and when he saw the word “pornography” his response was, “Flee! Don't think about it, don't write about it, don't research it, just flee!”

I slept on it and wrote this to him the following morning:

Hi Father,

The first thing I thought when I awoke this morning was, there's no place to flee to. As you pointed out in a homily once, you can't even buy a gallon of milk at the grocery store without being assaulted by trashy tabloids. Another priest says he sees more plumber's cracks on girls at the mall than he sees on plumbers! I quote both of you in the Advent letter.

In it I also write that I'm fed up. I've concluded that Satan has commandeered sex, which is intolerable since it creates life and is designed by God to help unite hearts. Enough's enough, it's time for us to take it back, to assume command; and one does not do that by fleeing or retreating; one does that by attacking. That is why I say we have to envision Holy Sex; we have to replace the demonic images that surround us at every turn with something better. That is why the men's group is so important.

They are the gates of Hell, after all, and the Lord says they shall not stand. Gates are defensive. They just sit there. It's for us to knock them down, to destroy them. We treat the gates of Hell as though they were planes or tanks but they're not. They're just gates, and they shall not stand!

Elder Anthony, quoted by the abbot today, says this:

"And then you have the desert. Even there the slayer of mankind tempted the hermits, trying to arouse the passions of greed, lust, and despair. Many fell into the trap, many. At the same time, how many princes and powerful people of this world were saved, and not only saved, but glorified by the Church as saints. They had everything, but their heart did not belong to the corruption of this world, but to the heavenly world."

Even if one flees to the desert it's possible to succumb, especially since most monasteries have Internet connections, e-mail, and web sites. Meanwhile it's possible to physically remain in the world and prevail.

The ex-porn star I mentioned is a modern day Saint Mary of Egypt. She is a miracle, and she is being more brave and manly than most men, taking on the porn industry single-handedly because she recognizes that adult industry workers are beloved by God and just as made in His image and likeness as you or me. When one contemplates the organized crime she faces and the dollars at stake, her courage is truly amazing and worthy of shouts of praise.

Am I making sense here?

Kris

So the dialogue continues.

God grant that some day we can gain a much clearer vision of Holy Sex.

Meanwhile, what about those men, who supposedly only want one thing? If they only want one thing, then why do we find them sitting under trees reading books, writing long letters to friends, studying theology, fighting wars, building churches and monasteries, and sundry other non-sexual things, to say nothing of constituting the entire patriarchy of the Orthodox Church, world-wide, for two thousand years, the Church that taught everyone what true love is, the Church that gave us 1 Corinthians 13?

What about them?

Could it be possible they might know a thing or two about love besides getting laid?

I suppose much of the above is a long-winded way of exposing lies about sex: that women aren't as interested in it as men, that men only want one thing, that women prefer chocolate, that pornography is a male problem, etc. Enough lies! Let's have some truth!

I repeat, what does Holy Sex look like? How can we relieve women of the anguish of the Madonna-Whore Complex? I am perplexed about all of this, as I am sure you are, too. I am wondering and thinking out loud to you in this chat, just as though you and I were sitting face-to-face at the hearth. I do not have pre-conceived answers.

Perhaps the answers to my questions may be found behind the lies, after we peel them back and expose their falsehood. For example, what is implied by the following truths?

- Women don't prefer chocolate. They enjoy sex as much as men do, if not more.

- Men are not only interested in one thing. They don't just want to get laid; they want communion.
- Women could learn a thing or two about love from men, like the importance of disciplining children instead of mollycoddling them (see the butterfly story, bottom of page 39), of steadfastness, or of soldierly self-sacrifice.

How about some respect, appreciation, and support for patriarchy instead of disdain and contempt?

How about treating men as friends instead of “Johns”? My wives volunteered sexual behavior I didn't expect of them – behavior they regretted later – because of preconceived notions they evidently brought to our relationship from prior experiences of what they thought they had to do to be loved. One had been molested as a child. Another had grown up in a promiscuous environment.

The truth is, I would have loved them anyway. They didn't have to do regrettable things for me to love them. All I wanted was a trustworthy companion.

Again, what does Holy Sex look like? How can we relieve women of the anguish of the Madonna-Whore Complex?

Nowhere does Romans 12:2 seem to me to apply more, than to these questions. Romans 12:2 says,

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

And nowhere does the sense of “groaning”, about which we read in Romans 8, seem to me to apply more in attaining this transformation of mind, since we are so assaulted and surrounded by images of unholy sex. It is like being totally submerged in quicksand, or a cesspool, trying to figure out which way is up, and trying to swim out: the more we flail, the deeper we sink. It's like being Jonah, sunk in the bottom of the sea, lying in the belly of a whale, head surrounded by weeds, groaning for air and light.

Passages of Romans 8 that come to my mind about this include:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:22-23).

“And in the same way, the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words . . . ” (Rom 8:26).

In the next section, I will discuss insights I've gained from my work about answering questions. In that section I ask,

“Have you ever felt so confused you didn't even know what question to ask? If you have, then you can appreciate the difference between that, and the point of clarity at which you DO know what question to ask. It's the difference between NOT knowing what you don't know, and

KNOWING what you don't know. It's a huge difference, and getting from the former place to the latter takes a LOT of work which, in my view, deserves profound respect."

After 45 years and three marriages, that's where I am: knowing what I don't know. I don't know what Holy Sex looks like, and I'm asking the question. The good news is, I'm beyond deriding plumber's cracks on girls at the mall, trash tabloids at the grocery store when I'm buying milk, and pornography. Enough unholy sex.

I want to know what Holy Sex looks like. I am groaning. My Advent prayer for all of us is that God would show us the answer. Amen.

Distinguishing Perception from Reality In the Context of Work

Accounting is counter-intuitive. If it were not – if we could intuit the answers we get from financial statements – then there would be no need to account. The reason financial statements are so vital is because they provide answers we couldn't get any other way. They prove that there is often a stark difference between perception and reality.

For example, say you earn fifty thousand dollars, and borrow fifty thousand dollars. Now you have one hundred thousand dollars sloshing around in your bank account: half of it earned, and half of it borrowed. Once it's in the account, it's just "money" to you, available to spend. If the checking account were your only focus, it would be easy to forget that half of that money has to be paid back at some point in the future, while the other half will probably generate some kind of income tax liability next year.

And once the money is in the checking account, how do you feel? Rich!

But are you rich, really? Nope.

Now, this example uses just two transactions. Imagine how much more complicated and confusing the situation would become with twenty, two hundred, or two thousand transactions.

Now which end is up? To what extent does your checking account balance indicate your true situation? As you might imagine, the discrepancy between perception and reality can become formidable; and I would submit, the results are now before us on a global scale.

So that's why I do what I do.

And as I've already mentioned, I'm becoming increasingly convinced that the real answers to our economic situation lie in the recesses of our hearts. In the second half of my life, I'm interested in somehow dealing more directly with them.

Insights Gained from Answering Questions. My priest's wife's name is Carol. I love her. I just call her "Mom." She's a sweet lady.

He has a complaint about her, however, love her though he does. She employs what he calls "Carol Answers." Here's an example:

Him: "Do you want to go to the store?"

Her: "Well, let's see now: we're running kind of low on eggs but Lent is just around the corner so we should

probably not buy more . . . Mom's hair appointment is the day after tomorrow, so I could swing by the grocery store then . . . however we're having the Johnsons over for dinner tomorrow night, and I suppose we should get a few things for that; I could make a salad with the vegetables in the refrigerator, but it would be much better to prepare a salad for company with absolutely fresh ingredients”

You get the idea. Can you feel his exasperation? All the poor guy needed was a “yes” or “no” so he could know how to proceed with his day. Of course, she's thinking out loud in an attempt to, ultimately, answer his question. But from his point of view, it's TMI (Too Much Information). In short, “Carol answers” drive him nuts and have become grist for more than one homily.

Some take a sexist view of this phenomenon, of answering questions nobody asked. I have a friend whose family is so large he could field a baseball team. He has nine kids: six girls and three boys. His observation has been that his sons deliver succinct, direct answers while the girls' answers aren't really answers; instead, they think out loud like Carol does. The example he gives is ice cream:

Dad, to son: “Would you like some chocolate ice cream?”

Son: “Yes please.”

Other son: “No thank you.”

Dad, to daughter: “Would you like some chocolate ice cream?”

Daughter: “Well, some days I like ice cream and other days I don't. I really like its creamy texture but sometimes I feel more like cake or cookies for dessert. Chocolate isn't my favorite flavor, and there are many kinds of chocolate – dark chocolate, light chocolate, chocolate fudge, rocky road, chocolate ripple, chocolate syrup – I prefer chocolate fudge - but my favorite flavor is butterscotch. I like ice cream on hot days, birthdays, in a banana split or sundae. On cold days, it makes me shiver, unless I have a hot drink with it (I like mint tea the best, but peach and cinnamon are also good. I don't like green tea at all, yuk!) Also, it depends on who I'm with. (Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh! DANGLING PREPOSITION AND SUBJECT/OBJECT CONFUSION ALARM!!!) If most of my friends want ice cream, then I like it too”

Meanwhile poor Dad is sitting there listening to all of this while the ice cream is melting. All the guy needs is a yes or no.

This particular father refers to the boys' answers as “blue” and the girls' answers as “pink.”

But we've seen male politicians deliver so-called “pink” answers, haven't we? So is this phenomenon – what shall we call it, answering questions nobody asked? - really a gender thing?

If gender isn't the cause, what is? Is it just carelessness? Confusion? Narcissism or self-absorption? In the case of the evasive politician, might nefarious motives be a part of the picture – deliberate obfuscation? Dissembling? Prevaricating? Is it the tell-tale sign of a scoundrel, perhaps? Maybe all of these motives and more help explain the cause.

Regardless, I am absolutely certain what it is **not**: communication.

Being in the business of delivering answers, here's another chart I've carried inside my head for years:

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answer</i>
Who?	Person or People

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answer</i>
Where?	Place
When?	Time
What?	Thing
Why?	Reason
How?	Way
How Much?	Quantity
Subject-Verb Inversion ("Is it?" "Are you?" etc.)	Yes or No

This seems like obvious, common sense, doesn't it?

Have you ever felt so confused you didn't even know what question to ask? If you have, then you can appreciate the difference between that, and the point of clarity at which you DO know what question to ask. It's the difference between NOT knowing what you don't know, and KNOWING what you don't know. It's a huge difference, and getting from the former place to the latter takes a LOT of work which, in my view, deserves profound respect.

Therefore, I have come to honor the sanctity of the question and, in my work, have been very diligent to give direct answers to direct questions; and I have felt profoundly frustrated by those who don't. As you can tell from the size of this message, which is now approaching book-length, I am perfectly capable of elaborating. But when asked a question, I refer mentally to the above chart and am scrupulous about delivering the corresponding answer first.

This concept pertains even more directly to my work when I am teaching clients how to use accounting software. In a transaction record there are fields for the date, the payment method, the payor or payee, the amount, the category, and a memo. One common error is that people will confuse the Payee, Category, and Memo fields. In the Payee field they might describe what they bought; in the Category field, they might describe from whom they bought it; and in the memo field, they might make a note of the payment method.

I resolve this confusion by explaining that the Payee field, when properly used, helps create reports that answer the "Who" question. The Category field, when properly used, helps create reports that answer the "What" question. The Payment Method field, when properly used, helps create reports that answer the "How" question, and the Memo field can be used to answer the "Why" question.

Over time and in summary, maintaining these distinctions – one of the many vigils I keep - makes the difference between sensible and senseless financial reports. It's vital, for people with sensible financial reports can make important decisions confidently and quickly, while those with senseless or nonexistent financial reports are self-condemned to a perpetual fog of confusion, error, and frustration.

I would even go so far as to assert that the global financial crisis we're now witnessing is positive proof that we need to improve our discernment – both in the area of distinguishing between cause and effect, and in the area of respecting, formulating, and answering questions.

Finally, I should mention that in my counseling experience with all three wives, I have found this to be a troublesome area, for the counselors would emphasize the importance of asking so-called "open-ended

questions.” By “open-ended” what they meant was anything but the subject-verb inversion, yes-no question, to encourage dialogue, to get people talking. This is understandable, but by referring to them as “open-ended” they (perhaps unintentionally) intimated that what my priest calls “Carol Answers” or my friend calls “Pink Answers” are communication when, in fact, they're not. So the end result of their well-intentioned openness was failure for lack of clarity, lack of real communication.

Thus I would offer the lesson I've learned from the first half of my life is that there is no such thing as an open-ended question. Each question requests a specific kind of answer. To honor and deliver that answer is to truly communicate – to sustain, build, and enrich relationships – to show respect for the strenuous labor required to compose a question, endeavoring to progress from the pitch-black darkness of question-less confusion to the questioning fog of at least knowing what you don't know, and beseeching illumination. It isn't about being a nit-picking, obsessive-compulsive control freak; ultimately, it's about communion: about illumination, about loving, caring about, and connecting with people.

Recognizing Ambivalence About Structure. As an afterthought to all of this, upon reflection I recognize the recurrent theme throughout most of what I've written so far is ambivalence about structure. Regardless whether it's marriage, housing, religion, work, or communication, we face structures and have mixed feelings about them.

In marriage, if I'm the husband I want my wife's help, comfort, cooperation, love, and respect; but I don't want to have to fully support her as I would fully support myself. If I'm the wife, I want the benefits of marriage but I'll hear none of this “submission” nonsense, dismissing it as antiquated, irrelevant, and oppressive. I'll insist on my own way, money, and property, even though in my heart of hearts what I really want is to be totally cared for by a man who I know beyond the shadow of a doubt cherishes me heart and soul. Each is ambivalent about the structure of marriage.

In religion, we want the warm feelings and fellowship but we don't want the duties, the financial obligations, confession, repentance, and we definitely don't want to fear God.

In work, we want money but we don't want to have to work for it.

In communication, we want to experience authentic connection with others; we want to know and be known; but we resent linguistic nit-picking, and we are not patient with lengthy discussions or correspondences. Instead, we rely on sex for instant connection, but in the end find it lacking and hollow when it is unaccompanied by authentic communion. We're ambivalent about the structure of language.

In all of this, it seems to me we have become ungrateful for the blessings of structure. We're afraid it will imprison us when the truth is, it can set us free and satisfy our hearts' desires. Imagine what life would be like if we managed to surmount our ambivalence, and truly embraced these liberating, life-giving structures, whole-heartedly and without reservation. From my point of view it looks blessed and sweet; and in the second half of my life, I am interested in surmounting this ambivalence and reaping the benefits.

A week after I finished writing the above, I received the following from a friend. Maybe you've seen it already, but it seems pertinent:

One day, a small opening appeared on a cocoon; a man sat and watched for the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that

little hole. Then, it seems to stop making any progress.

It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could not go any further. So the man decided to help the butterfly: he took a pair of scissors and opened the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily.

But it had a withered body, it was tiny and shriveled wings. The man continued to watch because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would open, enlarge and expand, to be able to support the butterfly's body, and become firm.

Neither happened!

In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a withered body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.

What the man, in his kindness and his goodwill did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening, were God's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings, so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

Sometimes, struggles are exactly what we need in our life.

If God allowed us to go through our life without any obstacles, it would cripple us. We would not be as strong as we could have been. Never been able to fly.

*I asked for Strength...
And God gave me difficulties to make me strong.*

*I asked for Wisdom...
And God gave me Problems to solve.*

*I asked for prosperity...
And God gave me a Brain and Brawn to work.*

*I asked for Courage..
And God gave me obstacles to overcome.*

*I asked for Love...
And God gave me Troubled people to help.*

*I asked for Favors...
And God gave me Opportunities.*

*I received nothing I wanted...
But I received everything I needed."*

.....Live life without fear, confront all obstacles and know that you can overcome them.

Reflections on the Economic Situation. On 11/17/08, I distributed the following message, which I also share with you now:

Greetings,

As a professing Economist, I suppose I am overdue to publish something about the current economic situation. So please accept the following, perhaps belated, remarks and observations, which I hope you'll find enlightening, encouraging and useful.

Economy vs. Markets. *I believe a lot of people are confusing the two. Markets consist of people, motivated by needs, wants, hopes, fears, beliefs, feelings, etc. Markets are driven by a lot of things, many of which are not rational like rumor, paranoia, fear, or passion. After all, as all competent salespeople know, most transactions are motivated by emotions (which are then commonly rationalized after the fact). Since they can be non-rational, markets are highly susceptible to self-fulfilling prophecy: fear breeds more fear; confidence breeds more confidence. The economy, on the other hand, is more substantive. Markets are elements of the economy, but it also includes the substantive resources they exchange, and on which they rely.*

The economy is robust, but the markets are hysterical. *Robust elements of the economy that I notice include property, plant and equipment; transportation and communication infrastructure; distribution channels; goods and services, both established and in development; institutions (government, schools, churches, hospitals, philanthropic organizations), stable currency and monetary system, and most important of all, human resources, i.e. ambitious, hard working, trained, educated, caring, concerned, (and even loving) people. Every day, whenever I venture out, I can not help but notice and appreciate these elements. They're all intact and fully functioning, more or less. I would feel concerned for the economy if these resources were somehow damaged by earthquake, fire, flood, war, drought, pestilence or famine, but they're not. So I am not concerned about the economy, but I am concerned about some of the markets within it.*

Everything is influenced by credit markets. *The United States began in debt. That is why Ben Franklin spent so much time in France: he was borrowing to finance the American Revolution. (For a detailed history of the country's surpluses, deficits, and resulting debt, see the U.S. Government Historical Tables by [clicking here](#), then scrolling to the bottom of the list and downloading the pdf document.) What exacerbates debt more than anything else is war, which occurs regardless of political or economic ideology. Debt has always been with us, and it influences everything.*

One person's asset is another's liability. *Even if one has no debt and is strictly an investor, one's investments are still influenced, directly or indirectly, by others' borrowing. For example, your checking and savings accounts at your bank or credit union are, to the bank or credit union, liabilities on its balance sheet. (In the credit union's case, it's actually listed as equity; regardless, it is definitely not cash on hand.) Your bank statement does not indicate how much*

of your cash is in the bank's vault; it indicates what the bank owes you. It is a statement of the bank's debt to you; likewise with your investment statements. Furthermore, to afford to exist, the bank or credit union must lend out most (90-98%) of its (your) deposits to raise the interest income necessary to pay its operating expenses. Those loans are listed on the bank's balance sheet as assets, and they are . . . and those same assets are also listed as liabilities on the balance sheets of its borrowers. Even the values of so-called "real" assets like precious metals or real estate fluctuate, and those fluctuations are influenced greatly by what happens in credit markets, as we're seeing now.

A few bad apples can spoil the whole barrel. *As far as I can tell, the current global crisis was caused by NINA (No Income, No Assets) and NINJA (No Income, No Job, No Assets) loans originated in the U.S., also known as "Liar Loans." All other loan portfolios were intact and performing; but this one dysfunctional segment caused a global ripple effect.*

Therefore, we're interdependent. My choices ARE your business, and vice-versa. *As Americans in a radically individualistic culture, whose country was begun with the Declaration of Independence, (and whose therapeutic culture, on the other hand, suffers much confusion over the distinctions between independence, interdependence, and codependency), we are reluctant to admit how interdependent we really are; but we're receiving a hard lesson now. Somehow, I predict we're going to have to disabuse ourselves of our self-defeating radical individualism on the one hand, and of our codependency on the other, by learning to pay closer attention to ourselves and to each other, to become more caring, interested, concerned, and responsible (i.e. able to respond) about what is going on around us, and to both give and receive greater accountability - both in our financial transactions, and more importantly and awkwardly, in the motives and choices that underlie, precede, and cause them.*

It will not be a comfortable adjustment. We'll have to learn to resist the hostile, defensive habit we've developed of saying to one another, "Mind your own business" or "That is none of your business." On the other hand, we'll also have to develop the sensitivity, maturity, and health to resist the opposite, codependent vices of gossiping, meddling, and blaming. Improving our planning, budgeting, and accounting skills can help develop such attention, accountability, maturity, watchfulness, sobriety, and balance.

Let's bear in mind the effect of the presidential election on market volatility. *Markets like certainty and dislike uncertainty. Presidential elections are transitional times of uncertainty. I believe part of the fall in the stock market is attributable to the uncertainty and transition of the presidency, and have resolved not to worry about short-term stock market behavior, but to reserve judgment until at least sixty days after the inauguration. Remember, you only realize losses during a market downturn if you sell. Now is not the time to sell, it's the time to buy. (Buy low, sell high. If it's good enough for Warren Buffet, it's good enough for the rest of us.) In April, I'll publish the customary annual newsletter and mutual fund report, which will indicate the net outcome of the turmoil we're now experiencing. It should prove to be very interesting.*

Silver linings to appreciate:

- 1. If you have experienced losses in the investment market - realized or unrealized - be grateful you had something to lose. A lot of people don't.*
- 2. It's a buyer's market in real estate and investments. Bargains abound.*
- 3. This is a favorable time for the poor and for first time home buyers. Real estate deflation*

was inevitable and overdue.

- 4. Gas is now less than \$2 a gallon, and this relief in energy and transportation costs should have a favorable ripple effect on many other necessities.*
- 5. We're experiencing a reminder that life is about more than money; it's an opportunity to focus on higher things, to become more circumspect and focused on the long run. Take some time to develop some long-term goals since it would appear that in the short run, we're going to have to be flexible. Take some time to think, feel, and relate deeply - perhaps, for a change. It costs nothing. Write a letter or Christmas card to a loved one that says something more than "Having a wonderful time, wish you were here" or "Happy Holidays."*
- 6. Appreciate the things in life that money can't buy like love, health, and wisdom. Lately I read a wonderful book called The Sojourner written in 1953 by Marjorie Rawlings, author of The Yearling. It was unavailable in the local library, so I had to buckle down and actually buy it on Amazon.com for all of \$1.53 plus shipping. I thoroughly enjoyed it and learned a thing or two, too. For all of \$2 a pop, I've been taking Scandinavian folk dance lessons since August. It has been a key to my sanity and health during a very stressful year, and has been much more healing and restorative than actual therapy. These things cost nothing or close to it, but deliver immeasurable value.*
- 7. Learn to cook something more than heat-and-serve convenience food. Crack open a cook book and try something new. Make it a festive event with friends and family. Add a little live music and you've got yourself a first class celebration.*
- 8. After visiting America, Mother Theresa pronounced loneliness as our country's great epidemic. Embrace interdependence as an opportunity to relieve it. Reach out. Invite someone to dinner or organize a potluck. Get more involved in community things that you care about. Help somebody. With cutbacks, downsizing, and layoffs, opportunities to help will abound. You'll get more than you give.*
- 9. Remember that necessity is the mother of invention. Those who can't find a new job might invent a better one than they could ever find. I sure did. Remember that some of the mainstay businesses in our local economy (hardware, groceries, financial institutions) were launched in the middle of the Great Depression. One of the best authors on this I've found so far is Dan Miller, author of 48 Days to the Work You Love.*
- 10. If you don't yet have a firm handle on your own economy, use this situation as a motivator to get a handle on it by making long-term plans, developing or updating your budget, marshaling your assets, establishing proper financial records, reconciling accounts, and doing whatever is necessary to make sure cash flow is right side up. By so doing, you'll become a part of the solution, for I am firmly convinced that the debt crisis happened because too many Americans don't do such things, relying instead on easy, unsustainable debt to enable chronic deficit living. Proper planning and accounting offer the opportunity to nip deficits in the bud, while lack of same allows them to snowball.*

And here is the part where I insert a shameless plug, for obviously I'm in the business of helping people get a handle on their own economy and otherwise make ends meet. If you or someone you know could use some help in this area, please contact me.

I hope this material has been useful; I've been mulling it over for quite a while now so it feels good to have put it in writing, for both your benefit and mine. Please accept it in good health.

Very kind regards,

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Reflections on Housing. I also offer the following reflection on the housing market which, along with the mortgage market that finances it, *appears* to be at the core of the situation.

For many years, I have pondered how we “do” housing. My family still possesses the house my Swedish paternal grandfather bought – in cash – during the Great Depression. A good Swedish socialist, he believed it was a sin to profit from the sale of property, since the earth is the Lord's and all it contains. He believed that land was sacred and that it ought to be sold at cost. And he was not a religious man. He just had a keen sense of right and wrong, certain convictions about which he was adamant. That was one of them, and it has influenced my thinking.

On my mother's side, my Norwegian grandmother was a homesteader, a participant in the “proving up” process in which homesteaders would obtain free land if they could prove that they could live on it. She lived in a sod house in the midwestern prairie, and later in a two story cabin on the banks of the Rogue River in Oregon, the floor of the first floor of which was dirt, until my grandfather salvaged boards from a Depression-era New Deal bridge reconstruction project, flipping them over to make a floor surface of the less-worn sides. She complained about the dirt floor, but she was grateful for her used-bridge-board floor. He never had much money but she loved him with all her heart and remained a widow after he died.

Now in a few short generations, we've seen the cost of housing inflate beyond the reach of ordinary people and become a dominant “wealth-creating vehicle” - a notion that would cause my Swedish grandfather to spin in his grave. We've also seen mortgage markets go, as my brother would say, “bollywonkers”, bending over backwards to help people pay the inflated prices, to the extent of the “Liar Loans” mentioned in the above article. Both prices and lending have crossed the line of sustainability, resulting in the present adjustment, which has caught eminent high-level and even Nobel Prize winning economists by surprise.

We've also seen houses grow in size and complexity. In his book Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community, urban growth consultant Eben Fodor shows how houses have grown at the same time that families, through divorce, marriage avoidance, and lower birth rates, have shrunk.

A few years ago when I was actively involved in the Boy Scouts as a Unit Commissioner, a fellow leader, while camping with me at a training event, opined with a chuckle that if houses were designed for men, we'd all be living in caves, and philosophy would be light years ahead of where it is.

That really got me thinking. Mind you, this guy is no misogynist. Unlike me, he's happily married. Still, there it is: something to consider.

Wade Cook, author of such books as Real Estate Money Machine, affirms this view in his advice on how to maximize value at minimal cost. On “Cooking” properties (buying the worst house in the best neighborhood [perhaps a foreclosure] on contract, improving it, and selling it on contract at a handsome profit), his advice is to focus on cosmetic improvements (paint, yard, bathrooms, and kitchens) that impress women, for they are the people who determine the buying decision. Hmmm

Lately I have had reason to contemplate the phenomenon of prostitution and recognize that it isn't simply exchanging sex for money in a single illicit transaction with a “professional.” Even for men who never venture to the red light district, hazards exist.

On the contrary, prostitution is a tendency which can occur along a wide, infinitely shaded spectrum of possibilities, including marriage. And it isn't just about sex; it's about selling out, about compromising principles for economic gain. The verb “to prostitute” means to sell out, to corrupt, to abandon principles.

Love and money, money and love: How can we make sense of it all? One Proverb (6:26) warns, “*for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life.*” Another (30:18-19) wonders,

*“There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden.”*

How are we to make sense of the relationship between love and money? Obviously, he who loves provides. On the other hand, reminiscent of Proverbs 19:4, “*Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man's friend deserts him*”, in the Opinion Page of the 12/06/08 Wall Street Journal, in “Divorce Lawyers Could Use Subsidies Too” Raoul Felder observes,

“When the economy starts taking a dive, mice leave sinking ships, and there are lots of divorces triggered. When the economy starts getting better, there are also lots of divorces since people detect upward trends, become hopeful, and plunge ahead.”

These are large-scale, macroeconomic, demographic tendencies. To what extent did these people marry for love, and to what extent did they marry for money? It seems to me that, to the extent that economics influence their marital commitment, they prostituted themselves – both men and women.

It seems to me (and to St. John Chrysostom, see Chapter 1) that, in true love, money should not matter; contentment and gratitude should rule. Idealistic though it may be, I still can not help but subscribe to O. Henry's Gift of the Magi model, about the poor married couple living in a one-bedroom apartment they could barely afford, in which the husband sold his gold watch to buy combs for his wife's beautiful hair, while she cut and sold her hair to buy a fob for his watch. Both of them received useless Christmas presents, but their gift-giving farce proved they had the one gift that mattered: true love.

I know that the Gift of the Magi model is not some unrealistic, idealistic fantasy because I've seen it work. I could point to many examples among my friends and family but the most recent, poignant, and memorable example is my favorite Scandinavian dance partner, a charming German woman in her seventies but who looks, moves, and acts fifty years younger when she dances with me. She's a vigorous athlete, full of life.

She is a widow; her husband died 25 years ago. He had no life insurance, so when he died she went to work and has apparently done all right by herself. She does not complain about how he did not take care of her financially; she just weeps and talks about how she loved him and misses him. After a quarter of a century, regardless of economic considerations, the grief and the love are still as fresh as the day he died. Theirs was, and is, true love.

Unlike her, it seems to me that many of us – both men and women – have prostituted ourselves. We have lost our way. We have forgotten who we really are, what we really believe, and what really matters. Since the largest purchase most of us make is our house, this prostitution has become most obvious in our housing transactions: in the designing, building, buying, selling, and financing of our houses.

Together, we enter into a mistaken, unspoken, subconscious assumption that love is for sale, and that a major component of love's price is a house. So the houses become larger and more elaborate, at the same time that the families they supposedly house, shrink for lack of true love. This mistaken assumption, summed across the many people who have unwittingly adopted it, creates inordinate, and ultimately unsustainable, upward pressure on house prices. We over-value houses to the extent that we believe they are a price we must pay for love.

It is as though we are sleep-walking through life, not even realizing what we are doing. Grievously, houses have become stock in trade in loveless sham marriages in which both husbands and wives enter into what is in substance a prostitutional transaction; and when the marriage facade crumbles, the house becomes the main point of contention, exposing the relationship for what it really is.

It seems to me that if we would wake up, come to our senses, and recognize what truly matters, following the Gift of the Magi model, we would pursue true love more and excessive houses less. We'd have larger, more loving families and intact marriages in smaller residences. Because of lower housing turnover that results from more stable families and communities, and fewer unqualified borrowers competing with mistaken motives for the housing supply, subdued demand would result in lower prices.

And instead of looking at the house – the wife looking at how much she can get, and the husband looking at how much he can afford, for they are obviously designed to impress women – men and women could instead

shift their gazes to each other's eyes, where they belong, where real communion happens . . . then proceed together, hand in hand, to establish not just a house, but a true home, appropriate to house their love.

This is my Advent prayer for you, for me, and for our country.

Chapter 6 – On Surmounting Depression

Following up on Lessons 4 and 5 from Chapter 3 on depression, here are some things I have learned and done to surmount it. I am sharing these things with you because the whole country appears to be approaching its own depression. Perhaps the insights and experiences offered below might help some to cope.

Again, I have learned that depression is more than sorrow. It is the loss of interest in living and in ordinary joys. Sorrow is a legitimate, sane response to sorrowful events. Depression is more than that. It is a life-threatening disability or disorder that must be corrected.

Fundamentals. The first thing I did was to ***just get out of the house***, move around, associate with positive, loving, encouraging, supportive people. Depression is a slow death; all one wants to do is sit and ruminate.

The next thing I did was to ***exercise***, even if it was just ***walking***. When I chose my apartment/office, I made sure to select a location that was surrounded by walking trails and included exercise facilities, which I resolve to use more in 2009.

Another thing I found was quite helpful was to schedule things that I could ***anticipate*** with joy, like dinner with a trusted friend, a fun event, a church service, or Bible study fellowship.

Listening to ***music*** also helped. For a while I would log onto pandora.com and select music from my youth (70's and 80's) that would transport me to a simpler, more innocent time, get me back into the carefree mood I used to enjoy when I was in high school. With this lighter mood, I was able to concentrate better on the task at hand and be more productive. Other stations I enjoyed included the "Prairie Home Companion" and Christian talk radio and comedy.

I ***stopped drinking alone***, replacing my customary evening glass(es) of wine with mint or cinnamon tea, which I actually prefer. I'm able to read without getting as sleepy, and I wake up feeling more energetic and refreshed.

Singing has also been vital. I find it is impossible to be depressed while singing.

Simple, heartfelt ***prayer*** helped. Sometimes, lacking the audacity to stand before the icons and pray in a proper Orthodox manner, I would just lie in bed and ask for help, asking God not to despise the work of His hands.

Confession of my sins to God with the help and insight of a trusted and competent priest-confessor helped lighten my conscience, illuminate my mind, and stop depressing, self-defeating behaviors.

This might seem so obvious as to go without saying, but I also had to ***choose happiness***, or at least accept it. In our first year of marriage, I was questioning the American "Pursuit of Happiness" documented in our Declaration of Independence, realizing that Jefferson's original phrase was "Pursuit of Property", which the framers in subsequent drafts then softened, replacing it with "happiness" to make it seem more palatable and less crass.

I was questioning the pursuit of happiness because my priest had cleaned out his book collection. I had inherited from him Sopko's For a Culture of Co-Suffering Love about Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, who has a low opinion of the United States, criticizing our country's "pursuit of happiness" doctrine. His opinion is that

we have used our pursuit of happiness to justify imperialism, oppression, and other forms of mischief and abuse.

I still think he makes some valid points, but I've come to recognize that for happiness to be possible, one must at least be receptive to it. During our first year of marriage, I am ashamed to admit that I had willfully abandoned the pursuit of happiness, emphasizing joy instead, which I saw as deeper, more significant, and more “spiritual.”

The plain fact is, it's a bummer to be newly married to a man who has no interest in being happy, who has in fact repudiated happiness – especially when there are kids involved who just want to do ordinary kid things like laugh, play, and be silly sometimes. In retrospect, I see how I allowed this dour view to exacerbate my descent into depression, as well as my wife's Dysthymia. To climb out, I had to stop rejecting happiness, and become willing to choose it.

Scandinavian Folk Dance. In August, when my therapist advised me to divorce her, he also advised me to take care of myself and to get out and “smell the roses of life.” At about that same time, during one of the last things she and I did together, at a monthly Swedish pancake breakfast at the local Norway Hall, I noticed a flyer on the bulletin board announcing a new series of Scandinavian folk dances that was being offered. I proposed that we take the classes together. She said she'd consider it; but has never come.

I have been involved in Scandinavian folk dance off and on since I dated Johann's mother, more than fifteen years ago. She said it was the best date she had ever had. Later, the first event my wife and I attended during our courtship was a Scandinavian folk dance event, which she also loved. (Johann's mother is Danish, and my wife is Swedish.)

Scandinavian folk dance is cheerful. The music is cheerful, the people are cheerful, and the movements are cheerful. It is difficult to participate in it very long without becoming cheerful. Those Scandinavians have got it figured out. They understand how to survive, and even thrive, during long, dark, depressing winters.

So regardless whether my wife ever decides to get with the program, I have resolved to make a long-term commitment to Scandinavian folk dance for my own sake. I view it as a sound aging plan, and it's my heritage. It is exercise, but it's so fun that one does not notice that one is exercising until it becomes necessary to mop sweat.

Not only does it relieve depression; it also teaches opposite sexes how to relate to each other. It teaches men to gently lead, and it teaches women to willingly follow. It teaches both to thoroughly enjoy each other and move in coordinated harmony together. It teaches men to prize, respect, honor, and admire. It teaches women to be prized, respected, honored, and admired. It teaches men to enjoy their masculinity, and women to enjoy their femininity; in other words, it teaches men and women to be comfortable and even happy in their own skins. It's a case study in that chicken-egg mystery of art imitating life, and life imitating art. Lessons learned on the dance floor may be practiced elsewhere.

Referring back to Lesson 11 in Chapter 3, it teaches men to take initiative, and women to yield it.

And it teaches community. Some of the dances are done in large circles or lines, in which everyone is interacting with everyone else. Others are couples' mixers, in which the combinations of couples are constantly changing. I used to think this seemed “promiscuous” in a sense, but I also appreciate how it affords everyone the opportunity to get acquainted with everyone else. With innocent motives, the couples'

mixers present an opportunity to expand one's circle of friends.

So please spread the word and join me if you're in the area. Currently I attend classes in Burlington Monday nights and in Bellingham Wednesdays, both taught by a wonderful married couple by the name of Bob and Carol Olson; and from time to time there are weekend dances and seasonal festivals. It's all healthy, wholesome, uplifting, and affordable, and a sure cure for depression. Give it a try some time - you'll be glad you did.

Here's an afterthought on Scandinavian dancing about another lesson I've learned, which pertains to being agreeable and living in the [U.S.A.](#) versus the [D.S.A.](#):

To my surprise, it seems to me that most of the people who participate in Scandinavian folk dance are politically liberal. But socially, they're fairly conservative. They tend to be monogamous, traditional, sober, hard working people. I like them.

This experience stands in stark contrast to the way the Right tends to demonize the Left (and vice-versa). Right wing ideologues would have us believe that Leftists are anti-family, anti-marriage, anti-tradition, militant feminists, angry, rebellious, and so on. Yet here I am dancing with politically left-leaning people who are very committed to doing something that is intensely traditional, "male-dominated", pro-family, peaceful, friendly, and agreeable. In some ways they're more conservative than card-carrying "Conservatives." It seems ironic to me.

If you've ever listened to Garrison Keillor on the Prairie Home Companion, you'll know what I mean. Garrison is a card-carrying Democrat. Yet his radio show is intensely traditional, and I can not imagine how anyone could deny that he is a delightful, authentically decent human being.

So another lesson I've learned on the dance floor that I can use off the dance floor is to rise above political stereotypes and deal with people as they actually are, not according to some contrived category. This – what shall I call it, realism? - can result in some very pleasant surprises.

So let's relax our prejudices, set aside our stereotypes, and deal with people as they really are. We'll probably discover we all have more in common than we thought, and become more agreeable people in the process.

This is my Advent prayer for all of us.

Chapter 7 - Parting Remarks

Thanks very much for taking the time to read this message, for indulging my “Communion Obsession.” I encourage you to reciprocate. Drop me a line; it doesn't have to be fifty pages. I'll settle for five, or even a fifth. Or you can call, 360.224.4322. Whatever works for you. If you're local, let's get together for dinner some time and philosophize in person. Let me hear your story. Let's know and be known. Let's commune. Now I've answered your question and it's my turn to ask: How are you, and what has been happening in your life? I'm sincere. I really want to know.

If I've offended you with anything I've written, please forgive me.

In closing I wish to publicly acknowledge and thank my father Carlin and his wife Sharon for their company and support during a very difficult time. Sharon has literally kept me alive by preparing nutritious meals. She makes the best salads in the world, and they are the best cooks in the world. She has been friendly, humble, patient, kind, and long-suffering. They have both behaved the way one would hope all families should. During the most sorrowful times of this past year, it has been a great comfort to me to just be able to sit at their hearth, stare into the fire, and play with Bill the Cat.

I also wish to publicly acknowledge and honor my father for encouraging me, many years ago when I first left home for a summer job as a farm hand in Wolf Point, Montana, to keep a journal. Although his journals and mine certainly contain very different subject matter – for we disagree vehemently on many important matters and have both learned more from his failures than from his successes – I must still credit him for introducing me to, and encouraging me toward, the journaling process, which is what enabled me to wrap my brain around both the past and the future forty-five years.

Without my journals, the discipline of keeping them, and the watchfulness it inculcates – an Orthodox trait called “nepsis” - I would have been lost, and this message would have been impossible to compose. Indeed I surmise that perhaps in spite of himself, by encouraging me to be watchful, contemplative, patient, circumspect, literary, respectful of tradition, appreciative of beauty, steadfast in my convictions, and ascetic, he guided me toward Orthodoxy.

Thanks Dad.

Again, please accept my best wishes for a blessed Advent, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, and a joyful, perhaps even happy and prosperous 2009.

Glory to God for all things,

Kris Freeberg