

Chapters: Collections of Short Chapters of Insights in Theology

From the "Major Works" series

CJS Hayward

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Questions and contact information: cjshayward.com/contact

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Preface

Among the Church Fathers, there is a kind of writing, a sort of genre, in which are presented dense "chapters" that, unlike the English usage, are only a paragraph long but pack in quite a lot.

The genre is commendable, and the writer has tried to follow that usage in the works enclosed. Whether he comes anywhere near St. Maximus the Confessor's "Chapters on Love" is another question entirely, but he has at least tried a worthy matter.

These may be inferior works, but there is something in them still worth reading.

The Arena

1. We stand in an arena, the great coliseum. For it is the apostles who were sent forth last, as if men condemned to die, made a spectacle unto the world, to angels and men.
2. St. Job was made like unto a champion waging war against Satan, on God's behalf. He lost everything and remained God-fearing, standing as the saint who vindicated God.
3. [But all the saints vindicate God.](#)
4. We are told as we read the trials in [the Book of Job](#) that Satan stands slandering God's saints day and night and said God had no saint worthy of temptation. And the Lord God Almighty allowed Satan to tempt St. Job.
5. We are told this, but in the end of the Scripture, even when St. Job's losses are repaid double, St. Job never hears. He never knows that he stands in the cosmic coliseum, as a champion on God's behalf. Never on earth does St. Job know the reason for the catastrophes that befell him.
6. St. Job, buffeted and bewildered, could see no rhyme or reason in what befell him. Yet even the plagues of Satan were woven into the plans of the Lord God who never once stopped working all things to good for this saint, and to the saint who remained faithful, the plagues of Satan are woven into the diadem of royal priesthood

crowning God's saints.

7. Everything that comes to us is either a blessing from God or a temptation which God has allowed for our strengthening. The plagues by which Satan visited St. Job are the very means themselves by which God glorified his faithful saint.
8. Do not look for God in some other set of circumstances. Look for him in the very circumstances you are in. If you look at some of your circumstances and say, "God could not have allowed that!", you are not rightly accepting the Lord's work in the circumstances he has chosen to work his glory.
9. You are in the arena; God has given you weapons and armor by which to fight. A poor warrior indeed blames the weapons God has armed him with.
10. Fight therefore, before angels and men. The circumstances of your life are not inadequate, whether through God lacking authority, or wisdom, or love. The very sword blows of Satan glancing off shield and armor are ordained in God's good providence to burnish tarnishment and banish rust.
11. The Almighty laughs Satan to scorn. St. Job, faithful when he was stricken, unmasked the feeble audacity of the demons.
12. God gives ordinary providence for easy times, and extraordinary providence for hard times.
13. If times turn hard for men, and much harder for God's servants, know that this is ordained by God. Do not suppose God's providence came when you were young but not now.
14. What in your life do you wish were gone so you could be where you should be? When you look for God to train you in those very circumstances, that is the beginning of victory. That is already a victory won.
15. Look in every circumstance for the Lord to train you. The

dressing of wounds after struggle is part of training, and so is live combat.

16. The feeble audacity of the demons gives every appearance of power, but the appearance deceives.
17. Nothing but your sins can wound you so that you are down. And even our sins are taken into the work of the Almighty if we repent.
18. When some trial comes to you, and you thank God, that is itself a victory.
19. Look for God's work here and now. If you will not let God work with you here and now, God will not fulfill all of your daydreams and then begin working with you; he will ask you to let him train you in the here and now.
20. Do you find yourself in a painfully rough situation? Then what can you do to lighten others' burdens? Instead of asking, "Why me?", ask, "Why not me?"
21. An abbot asked a suffering monk if he wanted the abbot to pray that his suffering be taken away. The disciple said, "No," and his master said, "You will outstrip me."
22. It is not a contradiction to say that both God has designs for us, and we are under the pressure of trials. Diamonds are only made through pressure.
23. No disciple is greater than his master. Should we expect to be above sufferings when the Son of God was made perfect through suffering?
24. Anger is a spiritual disease. We choose the path of illness all the more easily when we do not recognize that God seeks to train us in the situation we are in, not the situation we wish we were in.
25. It is easier not to be angry when we recognize that God knows what he is doing in the situations he allows us to be in. The situation

may be temptation and trial, but was God impotent, unwise, or unloving in how he handled St. Job?

26. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds by any means. We live instead in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods. And that is the greater blessing.
27. Some very holy men no longer struggle spiritually because spiritual struggle has worked out completely. But for the rest of us, struggle is a normal state. It is a problem for you or I to pass Lent without struggle. If we struggle and stumble and fall, that is good news. All the better if we cannot see how the thrusts and blows of the enemy's sword burnish away a little rust, one imperceptible speck at a time.
28. Do you ask, "Did it have to hurt *that* much?" When I have asked that question, I have not found a better answer than, "I do not understand," and furthermore, "Do I understand better than God?"
29. We seek happiness on terms that make success and happiness utterly impossible. God destroys our plans so that we might have the true happiness that is blessedness.
30. Have a good struggle.
31. There is no road to blessedness but the royal road of affliction that befits God's sons. Consider it pure joy when you fall into different trials and temptations. If you have trouble seeing why, read [the Book of James](#).
32. Treasures on earth fail. Treasures in Heaven are more practical.
33. Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for what good you do. This is a sign you are on the royal road; this is how the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.
34. If you have hard memories, they too are a part of the arena. Forgive and learn to thank God for painful memories.

35. Remember that you will die, and live in preparation for that moment. There is much more life in mindfully dying each day than in heedlessly banishing from your mind the reality. Live as men condemned to die, made a spectacle before men and angels.
36. Live your life out of prayer.
37. It takes a lifetime of faith to trust that God always answers prayers: he answers either "Yes, here is what you asked," or "No, here is something better." And to do so honestly can come from the struggle of praying your heart out and wondering why God seemed to give no answer and make no improvements to your and others' pain.
38. In the Bible, David slew Goliath. In our lives, David *sometimes* prevails against Goliath, but often not. Which is from God? Both.
39. Struggling for the greater good is a process of at once trying to master, and to get oneself out of the way. Struggle hard enough to cooperate with God when he rips apart your ways of struggling to reach the good.
40. Hurting? What can you do to help others?

Technonomicon: Technology, Nature, Asceticism

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

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

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

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

Hobbes: That must have been scary!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

tank ([see analysis](#)).

26. St. John Chrysostom wrote,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

wealth for other purposes than simply pandering to themselves.

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

notions regarding His creatures' best interests.

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

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

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

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

The Best Things in Life Are Free

1. The best things in life are free.
2. The best things in life are free. But what does this mean?
3. The best things in life are free. But we do not understand the truth of these words if we think they are filled out by hugs and friendship, or even love: [If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.](#)
4. A better lens comes from the condemnation of the Pharisees: [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean.](#)
5. It appears in Orthodoxy that the outside of the chalice is all feasts and beautiful liturgies, even during Lent: but on the inside is all repentance, deprivation and hardship, and being blindsided by rebukes. All of this falls under "The best things in life are free," the one as much as the other.
6. Well enough it may be said that sin is the forerunner of sorrow: [The wages of sin is death](#), and that death's sorrow begins here and now. Sin ultimately kills pleasure: [It takes humility to enjoy even pride. It takes sobriety to enjoy even drunkenness. It takes chastity to enjoy even lust.](#)

7. But this is not all. The outside of the cup is beautiful and its beauty is true and real. But the real treasure is inside. Repentance is a spiritual awakening; it terrifies because it seems that when we repent we will lose a shining part of ourselves forever, but when we repent we suddenly realize, "*I was holding on to a piece of Hell!*" and are free to flee the stench. What feast compares to the grandeur of real repentance?
8. The Great High Priest said, [I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.](#) The best things in life are free, and this pruning is a very big free gift.
9. It is when we are cleansed inside the cup that the outside is clean. Let Christ cleanse us inside the cup, and then inside and outside will both bear proper fruit.
10. The things in life that are free are persecutions, and we have on the highest authority: [Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.](#)
11. St. Paul goes so far to say, [But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.](#)
12. We may approach the outside of the chalice first, but it is a loss to stop there. We need the joyful sorrow of compunction and all that is within the chalice, and then what is on the outside of the chalice will be clean, and what is more, will reach its proper stature.
13. Every day take a little less, and pare down a little more. The Fathers do warn, "Do not engage in warfare beyond your strength,"

and the praxis is to crawl before we try to walk. But [The Way of the Ascetic](#) pares down, little by little, in humor, in luxury, in eating for a purpose other than nourishment, and aims to have none of it left.

14. [By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.](#) And by faith we wean ourselves even from a life centered on innocent pleasures, knowing that they do not hold a candle to the spiritual pleasure that is inside the chalice.
15. The cutting of of one's own will is free. And it is the experience of monasticism that this is one of the best things in life: a monk's will is cut off, not for the primary benefit of his brother monks, but for his own benefit. And the voluntary and involuntary cutting off of one's will extends far outside the monastery. It is one of the best things in life, whether we accept it as a blessing or resent it because we do not wish to grow up in the spiritual life.
16. Do you wish that this chalice be taken from you? Christ prayed the same, but he also prayed, "[Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.](#)" For some prayers are impossible.
17. There are two answers to prayer: "Yes," and "No, please ask for something better." St. James writes, [You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.](#) Passions are sinful habits that warp us, and when we ask for something to satisfy our passions, God only ever says "No" because he wants better for us.
18. Those things that are obviously good are nothing compared to the terrible goods: *the gilded artwork outside the chalice is beautiful enough, but it is nothing next to what is inside the chalice.*
19. [The Maximum Christ wishes the maximum for our lives, and that comes through repentance and the royal road of affliction.](#)
20. [Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for Christ's sake. This is a sign you are on the royal](#)

road; this is now the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.

21. No one can harm the man who does not injure himself. *Nor can any circumstance.* So therefore let us not be governed by circumstances, or think the less of our God when he allows us rougher circumstances.
22. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but there is another shoe to drop. We live in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods, and that is a greater good.
23. Perhaps we are entering a time of struggle. (*Entering?*) Perhaps we are seeing the end of exceptionally prosperous and easy days we have no right reason to expect. The same truths apply. The same God who reigns in easy times, reigns in hard times.
24. "Give us this day our daily bread:" it is normal not to know where your next meal is from.
25. The arm of the Lord is more visible, not less, in hard times. God's providence is stronger when you know you need it.
26. The chalice offered us indeed looks easy on the outside but is full of pain within. But the sufferings are part of the treasure. And the best things in life reach deeper than the golden ornaments that belong on the outside, but extend to the joyful sadnesses within. Those who shed at least some entertainment and seek repentance and compunction for their sins find repentance an awakening and compunction to be joyful and cleansing. And that is not all. Everything inside the cup runs deep. And everything inside the cup is free.
27. The divine sovereignty is never purchased at the expense of human freedom. Human freedom is limited, but this is not where divine sovereignty comes from. The divine sovereignty has the last word after every creaturely choice has been made, and the divine sovereignty shapes joy after every draught of the inexhaustible cup.

28. The joy of the best things in life is not purchased at the expense of the chalice of suffering. Suffering is limited, but this is not something the divine sovereignty is purchased from. The divine sovereignty has the last word after every creaturely suffering has been entered, and the divine sovereignty leaves people in a better place than had they not met their sufferings.
29. The divine life is now. The divine energies are now. Not later, once some difficulties are resolved, but now.
30. In ancient times the holiday of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection were celebrated together; even now there is not a separation between them, and we speak of a three-day Pascha. There is no real separation between bearing a cross and being crowned with a crown, even if it takes time to gain the eyes of faith to see such things.
31. Orthodox are iconodules, but God is both iconodule and iconoclast: he takes things in our life and makes them icons of himself, and he also keeps on destroying and removing things to make us more free to breathe. Heaven and Hell are both inside us, and God seeks to inhabit Heaven inside of us and uproot Hell.
32. God the Father is the maker of all things visible and invisible. God is spirit, and even among created things the first excellence belongs to the invisible. Who can buy or sell invisible things? This is one reason the best things in life are free.
33. In the Incarnation, Heaven kissed earth and the visible now has a share in the excellence of the invisible. But still [if a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned](#): the sale of relics is forbidden.
34. Do you believe the best things in life are free? Excellent, but [the demons believe—and shudder](#). Do you *live* as if the best things in life are free?
35. [It is more blessed to give than receive](#). What do you have to

give?

36. If you covet something and you gain it, it will bring misery once the pleasure melts away, and the greater the covetousness, the greater the misery. Covetousness is the inverse of what is inside the cup.
37. We want to have things our way. But the Lord has other plans. And what we will find if we yield is that he has other plans for us that are not what we would have chosen, but are far better. This is at once an easy and a hard thing to do.
38. In the Bible a chalice is both a cup of suffering to drink and a cup which fills with excellent joy. The suffering is as bad as we fear—no, worse— but if we drink of it we will be drinking of the very best things in life. The divine life in the chalice immeasurably eclipses the gilt ornament outside of it. Rememberance of death, compunction, and repentance dig deeper than the music of liturgy.
39. The best things in life are not just an ornament for when our material needs are well taken care of. It is true ten times more that they are lifeblood in hard times and harder times. And the chalice is inexhaustible.
40. The best things in life are free.