
Left to Our Devices

Playing with Spiritually Formative Media Discernment

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ABSTRACT Consumption of mis- and disinformation and “alternative reality” have profoundly shaped “Christian” identity for many. In this info ecosystem, skills for media literacy (or better, *media discernment*) are a crucial spiritual discipline for spiritual formation; media literacy as a discipline emerges in response to a new technological reality where spirituality and community are mediated by screens. This session challenges participants to *play* with media discernment as crucial for spiritual formation. Among players who live, move, and have our being in a media-rich, info-saturated system, *media discernment* refers to a disposition of heart and requisite skills for critically attending to self and to other in love so that info consumption nourishes wellbeing. (NOTE: For a richer experience, online content—including slides and gamecard—is available at <https://bit.ly/LeftToOurDevices>.)

MOVE 1: INTRODUCING KRINO

For the past several years, I’ve enjoyed the opportunity to present at Atla on gamified strategies for delivering information and media literacy instruction. Gameful design has become my passion, not least because I’ve experienced its transformational effect on how students engage content and how they inhabit communities of learning, especially online. Indeed, whether visceral or virtual, whether conference participants or *Proceedings* readers, we are a merry band of travelers bound together as a community of learners—and what is our aim? What do we hope to gain from this dungeon-crawl presentation?

Let me begin by sharing the point and purpose. Consumption of mis- and disinformation and “alternative reality” have profoundly shaped “Christian” identity for many. In this info ecosystem, skills for media literacy (or better, *media discernment*) are a crucial spiritual discipline for spiritual formation; media literacy as a discipline emerges in response to a new technological reality where spiritu-

ality and community are mediated by screens. Here, my aim is to challenge readers or participants to *play* with media discernment as crucial for spiritual formation. Among players who live, move, and have our being in a media-rich, info-saturated system, *media discernment* refers to a disposition of heart and requisite skills for critically attending to self and to other in love so that info consumption nourishes well-being. We wonder: Is it possible that our use of media—or, perhaps, our use of these devices that mediate for us a knowing of good and evil and a tethering of self and other—is it possible that our use of media might initiate within us growth and maturity?

Our path through this discussion is inductive; I am attempting to demonstrate possibilities for playing a game with students that helps them connect the dots between faith and ethics and information consumption. Together, we enter an information dojo. Heroes, imagine yourselves as a traveler, a sword-wielding traveler; you carry a *katana*, a sword for slicing, and your sword's name is Krino. Yes, you carry a sword and your sword is named Krino—you are a hero-traveler with a sword named Krino embarking on a spiraling journey through an information dojo. Our game is played at the intersection of media, faith, and culture, but rather than just thinking about media literacy or media ethics or the effects of information creation and consumption, we're paying attention to *who* and *what* humans are and *how* and *why* humans behave the ways they do in relation to information. You see, humans are desiring beings—we live and learn by our gut as much as our head. So, our session must pay attention to media-immersed humanity not just as info consumers but as neighbors to learn to love.

Have you ever considered that the information we encounter is a reflection of the mind of another person? Tweets, Tik-Toks, posts, books, films, advertisements, graffiti scrawled on the side of a building, secret notes handed person-to-person—all of this content is sourced in the mind of others. And so, in relation to all these neighbors we encounter every day—in person, virtually, or mediated by information content—you are in a dialectical relation to others, tethered by the information you consume. In other words, our information-saturated system is characterized by a dialectical tension between self and other, which makes it a perfect space for training in love for neighbor as self. After all, *You shall love the neighbor as the self; I am the Lord.*

But this realization raises significant questions: If our information-saturated system is characterized by a tethering of self and other, then how might our creation and consumption of information provide a kind of training in love for neighbor as self? How might media consumption help make us mature? How might information consumption form us toward maturity?

So, you are a traveler-hero; you carry a sword named Krino; the term *krino* signifies the act of discernment—and the aim of our critical discernment is not to shred to pieces the information we encounter, but rather to expose the faces behind so that we might encounter an *other* in love, and so that *encounter* fosters wellbeing in both self and other. OK, let's play a game.

MOVE 2: DUNGEON CRAWL—AIN'T GOT A PRAYER

You stand before a hulking, metal door; a message, stenciled in spray paint, reads: *Traveler, take care, and you best beware; in this dungeon, you ain't got a prayer.* Prayer. You whisper a prayer, hammer on the door with booming clanks; the door groans as it swings inward, open. You enter the first dungeon.

Perhaps it seems odd to begin our game with prayer—this isn't church or chapel. But I suppose, this isn't a typical prayer. If I say, *let's begin with prayer* (an anticipated, banal suggestion), many will know to bow your heads in proper, pious posture; but then, you'll hear a voice praying, an unknown, boisterous voice praying an unfamiliar prayer in an unfamiliar place—because I will have begun to play a video of the so-called QAnon Shaman praying at the Capitol inside the Senate chamber, where he leads other rioters in prayer—and it will be shocking and disquieting and provocative to hear, making some angry, disquieting the spirits of others; and some may wonder: *How dare our guide lead this band of travelers into such a disruptive and disrespectful encounter—I'm out!* But I've given you warning, so now you know what's about to happen before it happens. Friends, let's begin our game with prayer:

Jesus Christ, we invoke your name! ... Thank you, heavenly Father, for this opportunity to stand up for our unalienable, God-given rights. Thank you, heavenly Father, for being the inspiration needed to these police officers to allow us into this building, to allow us to exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists, and the globalists that this is our nation, not theirs; that we will not allow America and the American way of the United States of America to go down. Thank you,

divine, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent creator-God for filling this chamber with your white light of love, your white light of harmony. Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you. [Yes, Lord!] And that love Christ. [Yes!] Thank you, divine, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent creator-God for blessing each and every one of us here and now. [Amen!] Thank you, divine creator-God for surrounding ... [us] with divine, omnipresent, white light of love and protection, peace, and harmony. Thank you for allowing the United States of America to be reborn. Thank you for allowing us to get rid of the communists, the globalists, and the traitors within our government. We thank you, and we love you! In Christ's holy name we pray, amen! [And a-women!] [Find prayer here, starting at the 7:50 mark: <https://bit.ly/shamanprayer>; "A Reporter's Footage from Inside the Capitol Siege," *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2021.]

In early January 2021, a former graduate student asked me to participate in a virtual discussion panel he was hosting, attended by 30 to 50 working missionaries from various Christian denominations, all stationed throughout Europe, Canada, and the United States. Our topic was to be information and technology issues around emerging modes for “doing church” in response to COVID-19. As his research librarian and previous instructor, he thought I’d be a good fit for the panel conversation, which was scheduled for January 9th, 2021. When I accepted the invitation, none of us foresaw what would transpire on January 6th, when scenes of violent insurrectionists storming the Capitol dominated all media. Unsurprisingly, many rioted in the name of Trump; others, however, rioted for Trump in the name of Jesus, a hand on the Bible and a hand on the gun. I joined the virtual conference a few days later still in shock from all that had happened; my shock increased dramatically when the facilitator announced, “Our presenter for the next two hours is Chris Rosser, Theological Librarian,” and asked if I had prepared any slides. This wasn’t a panel discussion, it was a presentation, and I had to think fast. The tragedy of events on January 6 cannot be overstated; but they did present a glimmer of inspiration, and I announced a thesis for the presentation that attendees vigorously chewed for the next two hours: *It has become increasingly and unarguably clear that media literacy is a necessary discipline for spiritual formation. Let’s talk about why and what we can do.*

Historically, when the codex replaced the scroll as primary info-delivery device, particular modes of spirituality—novel means for spiritually forming and shaping adherents, like *lectio divina*, for example—emerged in response to new technology, i.e., the book. Today, info delivery is once again primarily mediated by the scroll,

except that now we scroll glowing screens for illumination. In this new information ecosystem, misinformation and disinformation are rampant; conspiracy entities like QAnon “crowdsource reality” by turning consumers into info mass-producers; and messaging is suffused with appeal to salvation: save the children, save the election, save the nation, save your power and influence—all are being stolen from you. Such messaging instigated events on January 6th, when the US Capitol was awash with antisemitic and racist symbols, littered by Trump and QAnon paraphernalia, and scarred with the indelible marks of Christian nationalism—in other words, consumption of mis- and disinformation and “alternative reality” have profoundly shaped “Christian” identity for many.

In this info ecosystem, skills for media literacy (or better, *media discernment*) are becoming a crucial spiritual discipline for spiritual formation; media literacy as a discipline emerges in response to a new technological reality where spirituality and community are mediated by screens. Let me restate that last line again, because it is the heart of the problem we’ll be engaging: *media literacy as a discipline emerges in response to a new technological reality where spirituality and community are mediated by screens.*

Activity 1

Heroes, as an example of how to gamify this conversation at the intersection of identity and media consumption, on the associated gamecard (<https://bit.ly/LeftToOurDevices>), find “Dungeon Crawl—Ain’t Got a Prayer.” There are four options for response; each option is associated with one aspect of whole-person learning: heart, mind, spirit, body. Roll your die; match your roll to the corresponding response; take a moment to reflect and compose a brief response; finally, follow the instructions to “level up.” Consider the following questions, associated with aspects of whole-person learning:

1. (Mind)—How does information creation and consumption shape religious or spiritual identity? (Yes, these terms are ill defined; just go with your gut!)
2. (Body)—Think about how our devices (computer, phone, etc.) mediate connection between bodies, a self encountering an other. Identify some positive and some negative aspects or effects of encounter between self and other that is mediated *virtually*.

3. (Spirit)—Have you ever experienced (or can you imagine) a virtual space that mediates and fosters spiritually formative community? What's that look like? What are characteristics of such a community?
4. (Heart)—What do you think it means that humans learn primarily through our guts rather than through our heads?

Hero, be sure to level up on your card; now, let's keep playing.

MOVE 3: DUNGEON CRAWL—ENCOUNTERING "IT"

Exiting the first dungeon, a deep breath, and a long hallway. At the end of the hallway, a mirror, the size of a door. You walk the hall, approach the mirror—it's smudged and grimy, and in its dim reflection you see yourself: messy, unkempt, bruised a bit (after all, you barely escaped the first dungeon); but you do look like a hero; Krino glistens; you like what you see.

Above the mirror, there's some lettering: *Now, a more excellent path to the end.* What? The words are familiar; they sound a bit like the Apostle Paul's musings on love in 1 Corinthians 13: *Now, I show you a more excellent way. Oh, it's a favorite passage; you have much of it memorized! Love is patient, love is kind; it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* But what does that have to do with getting past this mirror and out of this hallway and into the next dungeon? You realize, at the end of this passage is a dim mirror—an odd metaphor indeed: *For now we see dimly, as in a mirror; but then, we see face to face.*

At the end of the passage in 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul tells us that when he was a child he spoke, thought, and reasoned as a child; but when he became mature, he put away childish things. What's interesting here is the context in which Paul makes such a statement: he is discussing love, the kind of love that characterizes a mature disposition. It's a love that shatters dim mirrors in which we only see ourselves so that we might see face-to-face the others we encounter. Love always has its object; speaking, thinking, and reasoning as a child is like looking into a dim mirror, loving what you see, not realizing you behold a reflection of self, the true object of your love. But putting away childish things by speaking, thinking, reasoning, and loving as a full-grown person is an act of pushing aside the mirror so that we might behold the face of another.

You grab hold of the dim mirror and push, push, push it aside with all your might; and it moves, slides away, reveals an unseen doorway, a dark opening; and as your eyes adjust, you begin to make it out: a shape? No! A face in the darkness! Who—or what—is it?

Hero, take up your sword—take up Krino, now is the moment! Enter the dark, let's continue our journey, knowing that the trials we encounter produce in us endurance; and endurance fosters character; and character results in hope, and *hope* because we see our destination, our *telos*, our end; and so I remind us of the light guiding us to the end of our quest: *Among players who live, move, and have our being in a media-rich, info-saturated system, media discernment refers to a disposition of heart and requisite skills for critically attending to self and to other in love so that info consumption nourishes wellbeing.* We wonder if such an end is even possible, not least because it seems counterintuitive that our consumption of media and use of information might result in wellbeing. Mostly, our devices are good for escaping “the real world” for a bit; or, our devices are a delivery device for anxiety-inducing outrage. We eat the fruit of Apple, but is it good for us? Can the virtual foster virtue? After all, two-thirds of *device* is *vice*. We truly wonder: Is it possible that our use of media—or, perhaps, our use of these devices that mediate for us a knowing of good and evil—is it possible that our use of media might initiate within us growth and maturity?

Activity 2

Heroes, as a second exemplar activity for gamifying our conversation about media discernment, let's do something that might feel more like an actual game. Consider the beginning of a video from Tik-Tok, then try to predict what happens next. Now, let me offer a soft trigger warning: this video is heartwarming, but it's sourced in pain, the pain of the loss of a parent. If you start to watch and it becomes too much and you need to put fingers in ears and close your eyes or mute your volume, that's OK. But let's give it a try. (NOTE: The video belongs to Mandy Patinkin and is available at <https://bit.ly/LoveToAlaska>; in this game, the first part is clipped at the 2:08 mark, and the remainder is played below). In the clip, a young person who has lost a parent reaches out to Mandy Patinkin with appreciation, since her dad loved his film *The Princess Bride*. The first part of the clip shows Patinkin and his wife as they initially react to hearing this Tik-Tok for the first time.

You might know celebrated actor Mandy Patinkin from his role in *The Princess Bride*, or more recently he starred in *Homeland*. OK, so what do you think—can you predict what happens next? Here are four choices:

1. While they're listening, a cat suddenly jumps onto the countertop, startles Patinkin, who drops his phone, which thuds on the tile floor with an audible crack, and without missing a beat Patinkin looks directly at the camera and says, "*My name is Inigo Montoya, you broke my iPhone, prepare to die!*"
2. She finishes her story, and Patinkin, through tears, says, "Life isn't fair, it's just fairer than death, that's all" (which is also a line from *The Princess Bride*).
3. She finishes her story, and Patinkin responds by explaining that rumors like that on the internet should always be researched a bit more carefully, since skillful Googlers can easily pull up the transcript of an interview he did with *Vanity Fair*, in which he describes his motivation in the scene as Sigourney Weaver's character in *Alien*, who says to the monster, *Get away from her, you [...]* (and then there's even more censored, explicative language brought into our sacred Atla space, all apologies).
4. Patinkin asks her to find a way to share her father's name with him so that he can pray for him and for her, since he prays for everyone he knows, and now he knows her.

You guessed it—the cat knocked over the phone! Not really. Let's watch the rest of the clip. (NOTE: The video linked above can be played now from the 2:08 mark.) Indeed, Patinkin does ask the woman to find a way to share her father's name with him so that he can pray for him and for her, since he says he prays for everyone he knows, and now he says he knows her. If you guessed correctly, refer to the gamecard and roll the dice to see if you can level up any two of the four aspects of whole person learning that you choose. Remarkably, this woman's video was eventually shared with Mandy Patinkin because of numerous retweets and tags—a robust matrix of info-consumers facilitating connection between *self* (a grieving daughter) and *other* (her late father's hero). Though he does not know her personally, Patinkin responds with deep sympathy and action; he responds to her via his device because he now feels *tethered* to her. Truly fascinating.

What just happened here? You might be familiar with Martin Buber's "I, Thou, It" discussion of how human beings relate to each other. In a nutshell, Martin Buber, 20th-century Austrian philosopher, deploys three pronouns to describe three modes by which humans relate to each other. There's always "I"—me—the self, the point of reference. Now, the self "I" might relate to an *other* as a "Thou," by which Buber means that the self looks full into the face of the other, pays attention, is present to, looks the other in the eye, recognizes the full stature of the other's human worth. Or, the self "I" regards the other as an "It," by which the other's humanity is not seen, not valued, but instead the other's utility, for example, especially to the self, becomes the central concern. Likely, you can imagine many examples of situations in which we make people an "it."

Martin Buber is not the Austrian version of Justin Bieber. He's not a sexy pop icon at all; he looks just like we might expect his Wikipedia profile to look if we're Googling "Martin Buber." But Buber is staring at Bieber. As long as all Buber sees is a sexy pop icon, he makes Bieber an "it," an object or thing. But, if Buber looks at Bieber as a person, if he stares into his eyes, engages him, is present to him, desires to know him and to be known by him, Buber makes Bieber a "Thou," a person.

As noted, the information we encounter is a reflection of the mind of another person—and I love Patinkin's response in this Tik-Tok because the other, though a stranger, is humanized to the extent that he claims to know her, and this knowing produces in him a desire to pray for her and her dad. Compassion, empathy—these have been mediated by the device, over the platform, via the satellites, through eyes and ears and into the heart. Patinkin feels tethered to her, bound to her in love. I'm thankin' Patinkin; he's high-rankin', no prankin'. "No more rhymes now I mean it!" *Anybody want a peanut?*

But this example helps bolster our conviction that this tethering between self and other that characterizes our information-saturated system makes it a perfect space for training in love for neighbor as self. *You shall love the neighbor as the self; I am the Lord.*

And as we think about what it means to be tethered—self to other—in our info society we recognize that the messages we encounter originate from and reflect the minds of others who also bear the image of God (so say the three major monotheistic religions, along with others). This encounter, as mediated by our devices, obligates us in love to attend carefully, to pay attention, and as we encounter

difference to humbly make the learner's confession, *I don't understand, but I'm ready to listen*. This attitude is especially necessary and especially difficult when we encounter messages we'd rather not hear, information that originates from the minds of others who do not belong to my particular posse, those situations when it's easiest to gaze upon the other as pixel, as soundbite, as image, as it.

You know, it's interesting to me: we've just thought about Paul's metaphor of the dim mirror in which we see only *self* reflected: have you noticed that *our devices are themselves a dim mirror*? Have you ever used your screen as a mirror? The glassy screen—maybe a little cracked, definitely smudged with finger grease, probably carrying some variant of coronavirus—*our devices are a dim mirror*. My own device became a bit dimmer the other day—I dropped it on the pavement and now the protective screen is chipped and cracked. The reflection is worse now, but we do it regardless, use our screen as a mirror—smudged and dull, not at all a perfect instrument for reflecting, but we see what we need—*our devices are a dim mirror*.

Activity 3

Now, we are about to enter our final dungeon. As a final example of gamifying this conversation, refer to your gamecard to begin working on the next activity, mapping possible learning outcomes to each aspect of whole-person learning. Consider the outcomes listed, or create some of your own, and try to map various outcomes to mind, heart, body, or spirit. Descriptions of what each of those aspects entails are provided. Be sure to follow the instructions for leveling up! Let's play.

MOVE 4: DUNGEON CRAWL—IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

The face in the darkness you now discern seems to resemble Master Shifu from *Kung Fu Panda*, an odd turn indeed. Shifu summons you toward a light beyond the darkness; you proceed cautiously, but you are unafraid, mostly because Shifu is so cute. The light beyond the darkness diffuses through a papered door which Shifu slides open to reveal a small, unfurnished room. A subtle yet pervasive smell of reed-mat flooring—*tatami*—comforts you, and you enter the room: this time, not a dungeon but a dojo, a space for training. Scrolls line the walls, scrolls that bear messages to learn, messages to remember, messages for transformation. *The self-other construct is the substructure*

ture of the cosmos, one scroll reads; while another says, *Learning and love share a heart; each requires encounter with that which is not self, with one who is other*; and another scroll presents, *Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like bananas*, which is just silly. You are ready to be trained in this dojo.

Shifu unrolls a scroll—it's the Genesis scroll!—and Shifu begins to speak: we now journey back to the garden of early Genesis. In Genesis 1, we see that *Adam* (human) is the image and likeness of God as two together, male and female, masculine and feminine, that in this mutuality we discern image and likeness of the Divine. And we discover something similar in Genesis 2, where *Adam* (in this case, a singular and undifferentiated human) is made complete (or, no longer alone) when bone is taken from the Adam and used to form an *other*, so that *ish* (man) is now also with *ishah* (woman), and then *ish-ishah* reunite to become one flesh. (It's confusing, but you don't want to interrupt, because you've seen the movies and you know Master Shifu gets quite annoyed by interruptions.) Shifu continues:

A careful reading of Genesis 2 reveals a different creation story from Genesis 1 (for example, creation events are ordered differently), and now God is very personal—the imagery is rich and earthy: God with hands in the dirt crafting mud animals, breathing life into clay so that animals animate and are sent scuttling over to the Adam to be named. But the focus of the story is the all-alone-ness of the Adam, and this aloneness is not good. So, a companion is fashioned: bone of bone, flesh of flesh. And so, the Adam (human) is not one but two together, a *self* and an *other*. And what we discover as the focus of Genesis 2 is *companionship*—deep loyalty, fusion of identity, shared destiny, and (as we ourselves may have experienced as terrible departure), painful loss when death does them part. (Shifu sighs, pauses, and proceeds.)

As you see on the scroll before you, we believe that learning and love share a heart: each requires encounter with difference, encounter with that which is not self. Mature love has learned to love neighbor (*difference*) as self (*sameness*); likewise, we grow in neither learning nor love when we're only ever surrounding ourselves with *sameness*. It is crucial that we encounter ideas and learning that are different from our normed and conditioned expectations—we need encounter with ideas that may trigger visceral reaction; because, as you've heard me say, that gut punch, that visceral reaction, signals a gap between self and other; it is the first sensation of *krino*, of criti-

cal thought, and the visceral is a fertile soil for growing love and for growing learning. (Ah, the dojo begins to transform itself! And now we're in a garden and surrounded by growing things. Verdure. Fecundity. Eden.) Shifu speaks:

Some traditions—and I say especially Christians in Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions—take for granted that Genesis 3 describes the fall of humanity, since the narrative essentially depicts disobedience as explanation for sin and struggle, a story of initial disobedience as reason for expulsion from paradise and the presence of God. But what if we've misunderstood the intent of this story because of a category error—what if we've misidentified genre?

As you know, genre establishes expectation for what a text is and what a text is doing. Assuming that Genesis 3 offers an explanatory narrative for humanity's fall may edit out other important ways by which the story creates meaning. Let's consider features of Genesis 3 that indicate it can be understood as a *wisdom* text, more akin to the narrative of Job, story that problematizes assumptions about dualistic orientations toward God and human being in the world. (At this, Shifu casts a glance that says, *Stay with me, hero—you'll make connection between Genesis and media discernment soon enough! Persevere!*) Shifu continues:

First, pay attention to imagery: the Tree of Life is an image of wisdom in the Ancient Near East, and we find this symbol of wisdom in biblical wisdom texts like Proverbs and in the Apocryphal writings; as Proverbs 3:18 puts it, *Wisdom is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.*

Second, attend to language: humanity inhabits a garden; both are naked and feel no shame. In 2:25 indeed we learn that the man and woman are naked and feel no shame—the term *naked* here, *arom*, is wordplay with *arum*, the word used to describe the serpent as *shrewd*. And this word—often translated in Genesis with negative connotation as *shrewd* or *crafty*—is a word translated elsewhere positively as *wise* or as *prudent*, or as in Proverbs 14:18, *The simple are adorned with folly, but the clever are crowned with knowledge.*

Third, attend to players and setting: woman, serpent, man, and God in a garden. The humans are portrayed as children—naked without shame, sustenance and life all provided by the garden and by God. As in fairy tale or fable, they do not seem surprised when a serpent strikes up a conversation; and throughout the Ancient Near East, serpents were imbued with semi-divine qualities, not least

longevity, since the serpent is able to shed its skin and seemingly be reborn. God plants two trees—a Tree of Life and a Tree of Knowing Good and Evil—and if the Tree of Life is indeed a symbol for wisdom, then the fruits of both are “good for making one wise,” yet the Tree of Knowing is forbidden—it is an illegitimate means to an end. But note that the eating only makes the humans aware of their nakedness—so readers are left to wonder about the substance and content of the good and the evil they will come to know. (Shifu begins to twirl!)

Now—float! Float up, up, up, high like a bird, like a god—take in the view. See the woman, man, serpent, tree (PG-13 because they’re naked, float up high enough that all is obscured)—see them.

(You are astonished at what Shifu is conjuring, truly a master! Haze begins at the edges of sight and moves inward; clarity diminishes, looks like impressionist art; pixelation; blurring and flattening; until greens fade into white; and the white buzzes; static, not still but electric; buzzes like a bee; the white seems to hum. Shifu vanishes.)

You rub your eyes; you now sit before a glowing screen. *What? Hey, seriously, I...*

How can I assist you? A familiar female voice speaks with Irish accent, since that’s how you configured Siri in your settings. *No, I said, Hey, seriously, not Hey, Siri...oh, never mind.* You click the little “x” and Siri becomes dormant, listening to every word, waiting to be summoned.

You sit, perched before an altar, an altar of omniscience, where something like a divine being awaits in the cloud to receive your prayer, your question, your query. We don’t call it praying; we call it *Googling*. *What do you want to know?* It’s as close as we come to omniscience.

Siri speaks unexpectedly: Did Fauci really say, *Don’t swallow what you see on Facebook, for in the day you swallow it, you shall surely die?* You shall not surely die. What do you want to know?

Looks good, appetizing. Helpful for becoming a bit more in the know.

Yes, a bit more in the know. Reach, swipe, scroll. Knowledge. Certainly: a knowledge of good, and a knowledge of evil. “Volunteers are rushing to help homeless people in the Northwest cope with the heat.” *Yes, NPR, thanks, that’s good news!* “Quake-hit Haiti faces fresh threat from Tropical Storm Grace.” *Grace? They named a tropical storm Grace? Bad—multiple layers of bad.* “A California Father Claims QAnon Conspiracy Led Him to Kill His 2 Children, FBI Says.”

Evil. Evil news. It's a bad world—it's a mad world! And I don't like this feeling—so vulnerable, so helpless. The more I dress up my profile, the less people really know me; but the more I post and tweet, the more they assume they know me, the more exposed I feel until I feel naked. Siri, shut down my computer for now, please.

Float up again, friends, traveler-heroes, and see yourself as you now are: a *self*, tethered to so many *others* by your devices—heroes tethered for training, for training in love of neighbor as self.

It's a steady diet of good and evil, isn't it—our daily news? Personally, I can only take so much “reality” before I need to escape. And where do I go to escape? Almost every evening when I get home, I settle into a comfy chair, grab the Roku remote, click open YouTube, and watch Stephen Colbert's opening monologue from the previous night. *Stephen is there for me; we're tight! We think the same about things; he says just what I need to hear. He makes me laugh. Whew, I don't know if I could have made it the past seven years without The Late Show with Stephen Colbert!*

And that's OK; *it has to be OK*. But, it's *sameness*; I surround myself with sameness for the sake of comfort. I love Stephen; he comforts me; we're the same, you know? I recognize it more now: my desire to be comforted by sameness; I may not have recognized it as clearly a few years ago. So, I have to critically monitor my information consumption: *What am I watching? Why am I watching? What am I not watching?*

With such questions in mind, it makes me wonder: Is it possible that our use of media—or, perhaps, our use of these devices that mediate for us a knowing of good and evil—is it possible that our use of media might initiate within us growth and maturity? In other words, can our media consumption help make us mature? Can media consumption form us toward maturity?

In the garden, consumption leads to recognition of immaturity—*we're naked, we're children.*

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

You shall love the neighbor as the self; I am the Lord.

Through this “game” we've been playing, my aim has been to convey the profound implications of our work as information professionals, teachers, and librarians. Indeed, theological librarians are

uniquely positioned among our communities to foster and develop media literacy and discernment skills among the communities we serve. Our work to empower information, media, and digital literacies is important; *but why?* This work is important—perhaps now more than ever—because consumption of mis- and disinformation and “alternative reality” have profoundly shaped identity for many, not least “Christian” identity. In this info ecosystem, skills for media literacy (or better, *media discernment*) are a crucial spiritual discipline for spiritual formation; media literacy as a discipline emerges in response to a new technological reality where spirituality and community are mediated by screens. So, we must consider: How might our orientation to information become a source of truth, goodness, and beauty—a virtuous space—in our lives?

Questions drive our thinking as we continue; questioning is a path to maturity, a path we recognize as a necessary tethering of self and other, self and other tethered by our devices; and what shall become of us—*self* and *other*—what shall become of us if left to our own devices?