



A journal for restless minds

## TOXIC WASTE

*On the half-life of the human mind*

### BY OUR PASSION

*We shall know his*

### DEACON'S DINER

*Food for a restless mind*

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

## Toxic Waste

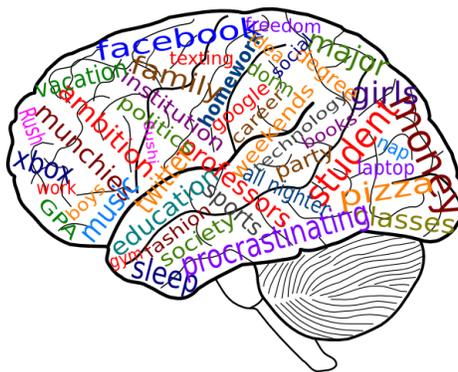
*On the half-life of the human mind*

There is a scientific principle, first formulated by Ernest Rutherford in 1907, which is now universally used to determine the decay of discrete entities. Known as an entity's half-life ( $t_{1/2}$ ), it is the time required for a quantity to reduce to half its initial value or in terms of probability it is defined: "Half-life is the time required for exactly half of the entities to decay on average," which means the probability of an entity decaying within its first half-life is 50%, within its second 25%, its third half-life 12.5%, and so on.

One would be hard-pressed, of course, to apply the half-life principle to human life, for humans are neither discrete entities nor does human life decay in such measured regularity. But, there are parallels to be made when we look at the half-life of the human mind.

With every generation,—over the past few centuries—technological "advances" have relieved the human mind of the necessity to use the mind to seek understanding, to discover meaning, or to ask the most basic of questions: Who am I? What am I? Why am I?

Our minds have been deliberately abused, manipulated, and altered by a largely unrecognized union of technology and psychology.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, our minds have atrophied, decaying over a series of half-lives, so much so that if the mind was a radioactive atom, all that would remain would be so much toxic waste.



Any reasoned discussion on the obvious and alarming decay in the cognitive abilities of the human mind must begin by acknowledging that much of the decay has been premeditated, a deliberate, concerted effort to create "digital environments that users feel fulfill their basic human drives—to be social or obtain goals—better than real-

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## By Our Passion

*We shall know his*

**W**hat are we to think? How are we to understand this “*passion*” of the Lord? Why do we speak of Jesus’ suffering and death as his “*passion*”?

Our thoughts of passion generally do not call to mind humiliation, disgrace, condemnation, pain, agony, torment or suffering, least of all, ignoble death. No, what comes first to our mind is something far different, more pleasing to our senses: we view passion as a strong, barely controllable emotion, an all-consuming emotional outburst of desire or love for something or someone. And yet, while this correctly describes a form of passion it is not the only way of understanding it.

Passion, comes from the Latin, *passio*, which can best be described as passiveness, non-activity, or accepting something rather than doing something. The Lord’s Passion, in this sense, refers to that moment defined by what was being done to him rather than by what he was doing.

Jesus’ public ministry was filled with “*doing*” things. Jesus was in command, busy doing, actively teaching, healing, performing miracles, counseling, eating with sinners, debating, and always, inviting his disciples to live for the Kingdom of God.

Juxtapose his public ministry with his last day. From the moment he began to pray in the garden, he no longer was in control; he was no longer the one doing things, but the one having things done to him. There, in Gethsemane he is arrested, bound and led where he did not wish to go, first to the high priest, then to Pilate. He is beaten, humiliated, stripped of his clothes, and compelled to carry the instrument of his death, the cross, upon which he would be nailed and hung until he died. This was his passion, that time of his great passivity, the time of his acceptance to the will of his Father.



**A**s Christians, we believe that through the passion and death of our Lord the gates of heaven were reopened for us. We believe that God himself, through his incarnation, died to save us from our sins. As Paul tells us, “*Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be*

*grasped.*” Even today, after two-thousand years, we still cannot fully grasp the incredible reality of the incarnate God. It is beyond our comprehension, yet, we believe, we have faith in the truth of it.

**A**nd yet, we cannot help but hesitate, to wonder why we feel so captivated by this cruel passion. There is great irony in its telling, for in its basest form it can only be described as an utter and complete failure.

What sort of king would march passively to such an ignoble and humiliating death. There really is no way to glorify it or make it anything more than what it was: Christ died a failure. It was a disaster, a ruinous mess.

Let’s face it, we all want to back a winner, and a winner never gives up, never passively acquiesces to losing, never disappoints by doing less than his best. Surely God doesn’t expect us to follow a loser, does he?

But then, “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord*” (Isaiah 55:8) and God’s ways aren’t something we can grasp.

Perhaps, to illustrate God’s purpose, allow me to recount a story Father Ron Rolheiser tells of his sister, Helen, an Ursuline nun, who died of cancer. As he tells it:

*“A nun for more than thirty years, she much loved her vocation and was*

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*much loved within it. For most of those thirty years, she served as a den-mother to hundreds of young women who attended an academy run by her order. She loved those young women and was for them a mother, an older sister, and a mentor. For the last twenty years of her life, after our own mother died, she also served in that same capacity for our family, organizing us and keeping us together. Through all those years she was the active-one, the consummate-doer, the one that others expected to take charge. She relished the role. She loved doing things for others.*

*Nine months before she died, cancer struck her brutally and she spent the last months of her life bed-ridden. Now things needed to be done for her and to her. Doctors, nurses, her sisters in community, and others, took turns taking care of her. And, like Jesus from the time of his arrest until the moment of his death, her body too was humiliated, led around by others, stripped, prodded, and stared at by curious passers-by. Indeed, like Jesus, she died thirsty, with a sponge held to her lips by someone else.*

*This was her passion. She, the one who had spent so many years doing things for others, now had to submit to having things done to her. But, and this is the point, like Jesus, she was able in that period of her life, when she was helpless and no longer in charge, to give life and meaning to others in a deeper way than she could when she was active and doing so many things for others."*

**T**he lessons which we can learn from this story should be obvious. There is something to be learned about how we see those who are sick, disabled, or terminally

ill. We can also begin to understand ourselves when we find ourselves needing to be cared for by others.

*"The cross teaches us that we, like Jesus, give as much to others in our passivities as in our activities. When we are no longer in charge, beaten down by whatever, humiliated, suffering, and unable even to make ourselves understood by our loved ones, we are undergoing our passion and, like Jesus in his passion, have in that the opportunity to give our love and ourselves to others in a very deep way."*

**U**nderstanding the passion of the Lord isn't really difficult when you make it your own, when you accept with humility and grace the unacceptable. And when you really think about it, every death is a disaster for every death is a total, utter negation of everything that leads up to it. Many nonbelievers, in their more honest moments, admit the unmentionable: death seems to mock our every hope and achievement.

After seeing so many loved ones die, parents, family, a child born too soon, friends young and old, whether by accident, infirmity, or simply time, I have come to understand and believe that nothing less than a God who would face our death could suffice.

Could a God truly love and heal us, all so burdened with sin and its weight of death, if that God, too, had not been filled somehow with sorrow, even to the point of death? Amen.

Homily for the  
Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion (B)  
Mark 11:1-10  
Isaiah 50:4-7  
Philippians 2:6-11  
Mark 14:1—15:47

## Deacon's Diner

### *Food for a restless mind*

**F**or those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

### BOOKS

**On Conscience**  
*Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger*  
Ignatius Press  
2007, 82 pages.

**Society and Sanity**  
*Frank Sheed*  
Sheed & Ward, New York  
1953, 270 pages.

**Strangers in a Strange Land**  
*Charles J. Chaput*  
Henry Holt and Co.  
February 21, 2017, 288 pages.

### PERIODICALS

**First Things**  
Institute on Religion and Public Life  
Editor: R. R. Reno  
Ten Issues per year.  
[www.firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com)

**Touchstone**  
A Journal of Mere Christianity  
Editor: James M. Kushiner  
Bi-Monthly.  
[www.touchstonemag.com](http://www.touchstonemag.com)

**Catholic Answers Magazine**  
Share the Faith, Defend the Faith  
Editor: Tim Ryland  
Bi-Monthly.  
[www.catholic.com](http://www.catholic.com)

world alternatives. Kids spend countless hours in social media and video game environments in pursuit of likes, “friends,” game points, and levels—because it’s stimulating, they believe that this makes them happy and successful, and they find it easier than doing the difficult but developmentally important activities of childhood.”

**C**hild psychologist, Richard Freed, contends—supported by a wealth of well-documented evidence and first-hand admissions by industry executives—that the technology industry, in union with “*Persuasive Technology*” psychologists are openly and aggressively working to alter how we think and even how we act. He describes this technology this way:

*“Nestled in an unremarkable building on the Stanford University campus in Palo Alto, California, is the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab, founded in 1998. The lab’s creator, Dr. B. J. Fogg, is a psychologist and the father of **persuasive technology**, a discipline in which digital machines and apps—including smartphones, social media, and video games—are configured to alter human thoughts and behaviors. As the lab’s website boldly proclaims: ‘**Machines designed to change humans.**’*

*Fogg speaks openly of the ability to use smartphones and other digital devices to change our ideas and actions: ‘We can now create machines that can change what people think and what people do, and the machines can do that autonomously.’”*

Before dismissing persuasive technology as so much hocus-pocus marketing boil and bother, listen to what

Fogg proudly touts on his website: *“My students often do groundbreaking projects, and they continue having impact in the real world after they leave Stanford... For example, Instagram has influenced the behavior of over 800 million people. The co-founder was a student of mine.”*

According to Fogg, the “Fogg Behavior Model” is a well-tested method to change behavior and, in its simplified form, involves three primary factors: *motivation, ability, and triggers*. Describing how his formula is effective at getting people to use a social network, the psychologist, in an academic paper noted that a key *motivator* is the user’s desire for “*social acceptance*,” although he claims, an even more powerful motivator is the desire “*to avoid being socially rejected*.” As for *ability*, he suggests that digital products should be made so that users don’t have to “*think hard*,” implying social networks are designed for ease of use. And finally, he says potential users need to be *triggered* to use a site, accomplished by a plethora of digital tricks, such as sending incessant notifications urging users to view friends’ pictures, telling them they are missing out while not on the social network, or suggesting that they check—yet again—to see if anyone liked their post or photo.

**Y**et, absent is any discussion on the salubrious, ethical, or moral grounds of persuasive technologies. As Freed points out, “Fogg’s formula is the blueprint for building multibillion dollar social media and gaming companies. However, moral questions about the impact of turning persuasive techniques on children and teens are

*not being asked. For example, should the fear of social rejection be used to compel kids to compulsively use social media? Is it okay to lure kids away from school tasks that demand a strong mental effort so they can spend their lives on social networks or playing video games that don’t make them think much at all? And is it okay to incessantly trigger kids to use revenue-producing digital products at the expense of engaging with family and other important real-life activities?”*

*“Persuasive technologies work” Freed says “because of their apparent triggering of the release of dopamine, a powerful neurotransmitter involved in reward, attention, and addiction. In the Venice region of Los Angeles, now dubbed ‘Silicon Beach,’ the startup Dopamine Labs boasts about its use of persuasive techniques to increase profits: ‘Connect your app to our Persuasive AI [Artificial Intelligence] and lift your engagement and revenue up to 30% by giving your users our perfect bursts of dopamine,’ and ‘A burst of Dopamine doesn’t just feel good: it’s proven to rewire user behavior and habits.’*

*Ramsay Brown, the founder of Dopamine Labs, says in a KQED Science article, ‘We have now developed a rigorous technology of the human mind, and that is both exciting and terrifying. We have the ability to twiddle some knobs in a machine learning dashboard we build, and around the world hundreds of thousands of people are going to quietly change their behavior in ways that, unbeknownst to them, feel second-nature but are really by design.’ Programmers call this ‘brain hacking,’ as it compels users to spend more time on sites even though they mistakenly believe it’s strictly due to their own conscious choices.”*

**F**reed goes on to provide a peek behind the curtain. He writes, “While social media and video game companies have been surprisingly successful at hiding their use of persuasive design from the public, one breakthrough occurred in 2017 when Facebook documents were leaked to *The Australian*. The internal report crafted by Facebook executives showed the social network boasting to advertisers that by monitoring posts, interactions, and photos in real time, the network is able to track when teens feel ‘insecure,’ ‘worthless,’ ‘stressed,’ ‘useless’ and a ‘failure.’ Why would the social network do this? The report also bragged about Facebook’s ability to micro-target ads down to ‘moments when young people need a confidence boost.’

*Persuasive technology’s use of digital media to target children, deploying the weapon of psychological manipulation at just the right moment, is what makes it so powerful. These design techniques provide tech corporations a window into kids’ hearts and minds to measure their particular vulnerabilities, which can then be used to control their behavior as consumers. This isn’t some strange future... this is now.*

Adding to the frightening reality of persuasive design/technology’s ability to drive kids’ addictions to devices, is the intentional, deliberate use of addictive knowledge to make persuasive design more effective at hijacking the mind. Dopamine Labs’ Ramsay Brown publicly acknowledged as much in an episode of CBS’s *60 Minutes*, when he stated, “Since we’ve figured to some extent how these pieces of the brain that handle addiction are working, people have figured out how to juice them further and

*how to bake that information into apps.”*

Freed notes that “The creation of digital products with drug-like effects that are able to ‘pull a person away’ from engaging in real-life activities is the reason why persuasive technology is profoundly destructive. Today, persuasive design is likely distracting adults from driving safely, productive work, and engaging with their own children—all matters which need urgent attention. Still, because the child and adolescent brain is more easily controlled than the adult mind, the use of persuasive design is having a much more hurtful impact on kids.

*Persuasive technologies are reshaping childhood, luring kids away from family and schoolwork to spend more and more of their lives sitting before screens and phones. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation report, younger U.S. children now spend 5 1/2 hours each day with entertainment technologies, including video games, social media, and online videos. Even more, the average teen now spends an incredible 8 hours each day playing with screens and phones. Productive uses of technology—where persuasive design is much less a factor—are almost an afterthought, as U.S. kids only spend 16 minutes each day using the computer at home for school.*

*Quietly, using screens and phones for entertainment has become the dominant activity of childhood. Younger kids spend more time engaging with entertainment screens than they do in school, and teens spend even more time playing with screens and phones than they do sleeping. The result is apparent in restaurants, the car sitting next to you at the stoplight, and even many classrooms. Attesting to the success of persuasive technology, kids are*

*so taken with their phones and other devices that they have turned their backs to the world around them. Hiding in bedrooms on devices, or consumed by their phones in the presence of family, many children are missing out on real-life engagement with family and school—the two cornerstones of childhood that lead them to grow up happy and successful. Even during the few moments kids have away from their devices, they are often preoccupied with one thought: getting back on them.”*

In a recent interview, Dr. Jean Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University, and someone who began doing research 25 years ago on generation differences, stated that she saw something that scared her to the core. 2011-2012, she said, marked the year when those having iPhones went over the 50% mark. And those results should frighten all of us, for, as Dr. Twenge notes:

- This was the year that more kids started to say that they felt “sad, hopeless, useless... that they couldn’t do anything right (depression).”
- They felt left-out and lonely.
- There is a 50% increase in a clinical level of depression between 2011-2015.
- A substantial increase in suicide rate.
- Teens aren’t hanging out with friends nearly as much.
- They aren’t dating as much (see chart 1 on page 6).
- They are more likely to feel lonely (see chart 2 on page 6).
- They are getting less sleep (see chart 3 on page 6).

She goes on to say that we are in the worst mental health crisis in decades. No kidding!

So, why is this happening? Why are kids more depressed because of electronics? If you are still in a quandary, re-read last week's essay and this essay.

Assuming you are old enough—you grew up before cell phones and ubiquitous video game players—think about when you were in school—you didn't know every time there was a get together (a.k.a. party) that you weren't invited. And, you didn't see pictures posted on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or other social media to add to your angst.

According to Victoria Prooday, Occupational Therapist and writer at YourOT.com, "There is a silent tragedy developing right now, in our homes, and it concerns our most precious jewels—our children... Researchers have been releasing alarming statistics on a sharp and steady increase in kids' mental illness, which is now reaching epidemic proportions:

- 1 in 5 children has mental health problems
- 43% increase in ADHD
- 37% increase in teen depression
- 200% increase in the suicide rate in kids 10-14 years old."

She goes on to say that "Today's children are being deprived of the fundamentals of a healthy childhood:

- Emotionally available parents
- Clearly defined limits and guidance
- Responsibilities
- Balanced nutrition and adequate sleep
- Movement and outdoors
- Creative play, social interaction, opportunities for unstructured times and boredom.

Instead, children are being served with:

- Digitally distracted parents
- Indulgent parents who let kids 'Rule the world'
- Sense of entitlement rather than responsibility
- Inadequate sleep and unbalanced nutrition
- Sedentary indoor lifestyle
- Endless stimulation, technological babysitters, instant gratification, and absence of dull moments."

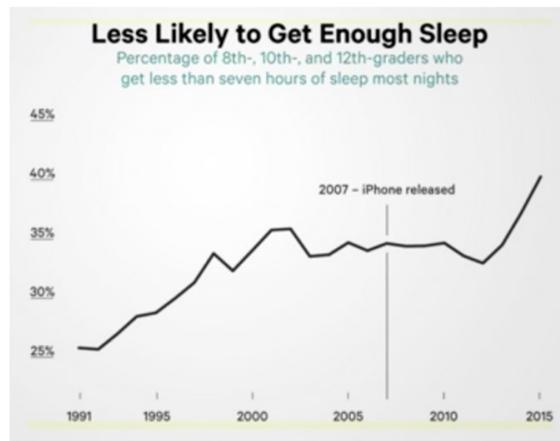
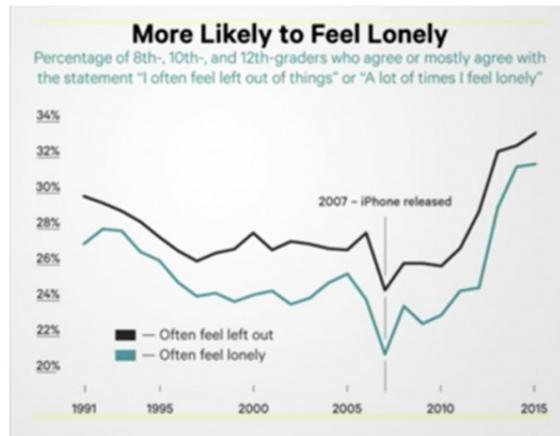
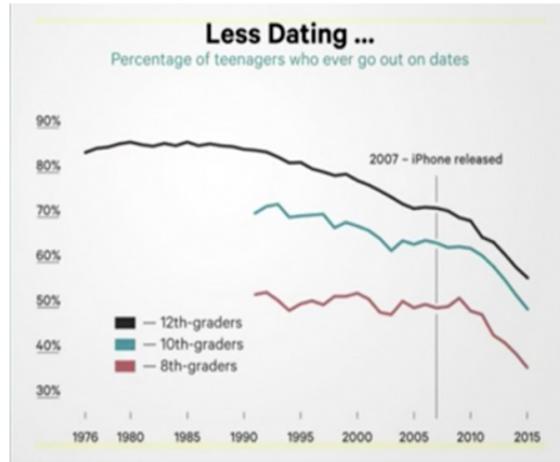
Still not convinced? Listen to two former Facebook execs describe how Facebook is explicitly designed to be **addictive**. As John Burger wrote in Aleteia this past December:

"It's almost as if the CEO of a famous soft drink company came out and said he refuses to let his kids drink the stuff. Or the fellow in charge of safety checks at a leading automobile manufacturer admitting that he gets nervous when he drives the vehicles over 60 mph.

Two former executives at Facebook have expressed deep reservations about what effects social media is having on the minds of young people and on society in general.

In early November, Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, said in an interview with Axios that social networks intentionally hook people and potentially hurt our brains.

When a social network 'grows to a billion or 2 billion people ... it literally



changes your relationship with society, with each other,' Parker said. 'It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains.'

Parker said that when Facebook was in its development phase, its planners were thinking of ways to 'consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible.' The answer was to play on people's need for attention and affirmation.

"And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that's going to get you to contribute more content, and that's going to get you ... more likes and comments.'

Days later, Facebook's former head of user growth concurred, saying Facebook encourages 'fake, brittle popularity,' leaving users feeling empty and needing another hit, according to *The Verge*. In a talk at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, Chamath Palihapitiya suggested that this 'vicious circle' drives people to keep sharing posts that they think will gain other people's approval.

The effect that Facebook has on society is bad enough, in his view, that people should take a 'hard break' from it. He said he tries to use it as little as possible, and won't allow his children to use it at all.

'The short-term, dopamine feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation, [but] misinformation, mistruth,' said Palihapitiya. 'I think we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works.'

Palihapitiya could speak from his ex-

perience at Facebook, but other social media platforms can be just as bad, he suggested. In India for example, some people shared hoax messages about kidnappings on WhatsApp, ultimately resulting in the lynching of seven innocent people.

'Imagine taking that to the extreme, where bad actors can now manipulate large swaths of people to do anything you want. It's just a really, really bad state of affairs,' said Palihapitiya."<sup>3</sup>

In his practice as a child and adolescent psychologist, Richard Freed has observed how many of "These parents say their kids' extreme overuse of phones, video games, and social media is the most difficult parenting issue they face—and, in many cases, is tearing the family apart. Preteen and teen girls refuse to get off their phones, even though it's remarkably clear that the devices are making them miserable. I also see far too many boys whose gaming obsessions lead them to forgo interest in school, extracurricular activities, and anything else productive. Some of these boys, as they reach their later teens, use their large bodies to terrorize parents who attempt to set gaming limits."

The addictiveness of technological devices running apps built upon persuasive technology has been likened to other highly addictive substances, such as nicotine and opiates. It is a tragedy largely ignored or unknown by just about everyone. Freed writes, "What none of these parents understand is that their children's and teens' destructive obsession with technology is the predictable consequence of a virtually unrecognized merger between the tech industry and psychology. This alliance pairs the consumer tech industry's immense wealth with the most

sophisticated psychological research, making it possible to develop social media, video games, and phones with drug-like power to seduce young users."

Like a jigsaw puzzle with a thousand pieces, no one can possibly hope to discern the whole while focusing on a single piece. And yet, that is precisely what we are wont to do, isn't it? We want someone to fix what has been broken. We want the puzzle solved with a single piece. We are impatient, for time and tide wait for no one. We demand action and solutions without thought for the inevitable consequential unintended consequences.

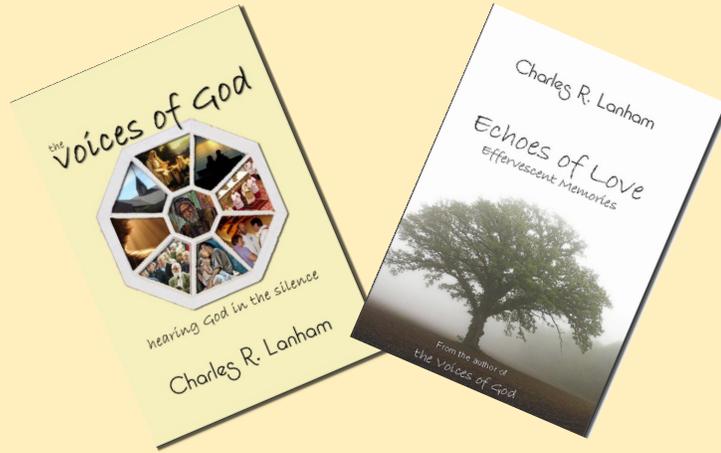
Our minds have decayed, brutishly damaged at our own hand. We have lost God and in the losing we have lost what is most essential, the spirit. We have closed our minds to greatness, chosen comfort and ease before effort and purpose. We search no more for meaning or reason; truth and love are but vagaries of the mind now floating high on vaped clouds of pleasant dreams. We stare in adoring fascination at the mirrored image, bend the knee in worship to our god and cry out in anguish: "Oh, when will they ever learn?" When will we?

1. Richard Freed, "The Tech Industry's War on Kids: How psychology is being used as a weapon against children", Medium, Mar 11, 2018, <https://medium.com/@richardnfreed/the-tech-industrys-psychological-war-on-kids-c452870464ce>.

Richard Freed is a child and adolescent psychologist and the author of "Wired Child: Reclaiming Childhood in a Digital Age".

2. Becky Mansfield, "The scary truth about what's hurting our kids", Your Modern Family, <https://www.yourmodernfamily.com/scary-truth-whats-hurting-kids/>.

3. John Burger, "Former Facebook execs warn of social media dangers to people and society", Aleteia, Dec. 13, 2017.



Books are available on **Amazon.com** or from the author's web site at:

**deaconscorner.org**

**Deacon Chuck Lanham** is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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Each issue of **Colloquī** can be viewed or downloaded from

**<http://deaconscorner.org>**.

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## **Deacon's Corner Publishing**

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