

What's on your mind?

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How Facebook connects me to the body of Christ

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When I was in seventh grade one of my best friends was a boy named Marc. We both lived in Michigan, but Marc's family also had a house in Boulder, Colorado, where they spent a couple months every summer. During that time, Marc and I would write letters to each other. One summer he wrote, "Whenever I get lonely, I just look at all the names in my address book and I feel better."

I thought about Marc's letter recently because of a comment my husband, Gary, made. We were in the car—he was driving and I was checking my emails and Facebook updates on my phone—when he said, "I don't really get the whole Facebook status updates thing. Why do you do that?"

For those of you who are not on Facebook, at the top of the page of this online social media site, there is a question for you to answer and a blank to fill in, if you choose to. The question, up until a couple months ago, was simply, "What are you doing right now?" It's recently been changed to "What's on your mind?" I receive a list of status updates from all my Facebook friends directly to my phone, so I can check on them anywhere and

anytime. I can also update my status from my phone as well.

"I don't know," I answered. Then I remembered Marc's comment about his address book, which I shared with Gary. "I think Facebook is like that for a lot of us," I said. "It's how we stay in touch, how we keep from feeling so alone, how we express our need for each other. Whenever we feel lonely or disconnected, we can just check out our friends online and, like Marc, it makes us feel better."

"But isn't it hard to think of something to say all the time?" he asked.

"It's not so much what you say that matters," I explained. "It's just that you say *something*. It's the act of putting yourself out there that matters."

"It's kind of a ritual then," Gary said, beginning to get it. Gary, who works at a seminary and is the pastor of worship and the arts at a downtown Chicago church, understands the importance of rituals. "Kind of like confession or passing the peace."

"Yeah, sort of. It's like how you can laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep," I said, paraphrasing Romans 12.

After this conversation I went back and re-read Romans 12. I've always

been moved by the portrait of the church this passages paints. But truth be told, I've also sort of resented it at the same time. The reality of the way we live our lives today makes it nearly impossible to be a part of this sort of body of Christ.

Look at the first thing we're "urged" to do in Romans 12:1: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." Or as it's translated in *The Message*: "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering."

I don't know if you've ever really tried to do that—to be present and aware of the moments of your everyday, ordinary life, and place those moments into the hands of God—but I have found it to be extraordinarily hard. I feel like I am always rushing to the next thing. I have a full-time job, I sing in the choir at church and volunteer as one of the youth leaders. I have two teenage daughters who have lots of interests and a great need for parents who take an interest in their interests as well as provide them with transportation to pursue those interests. I have a husband who has

two part-time jobs that add up to one long stream of work that never seems to end. For us to have quality time together, which we both really want, requires creativity, stamina, and an ability to wedge intimacy into the tiniest of cracks. Somehow, in the midst of all that, I'm supposed to stop and reflect enough to offer up my life to God? Yeah, right.

Here's the thing, though. Facebook, strangely enough, helps me do just that. Taking a moment or two to answer that little question it poses for me every day, "What's on your mind?" draws me into a brief period of self-reflection. My answers aren't necessarily profound, but I try to make sure they are honest.

Many of them are mundane, "It's snowing again? Come on..." or infused with boredom, and maybe a bit of frustration: "Waiting for a meeting to start, staring at a speaker phone that sits like an idol to be worshiped in the middle of a fake wood table."

Some of them are more intimate and confessional, and I end up saying something out in the very public sphere of Facebook that I might have a hard time saying out loud to a friend standing in front of me: "Lenora Rand...is feeling jealous. Which she was trying to give up for Lent. Ah well."

Some of my comments are only thinly veiled admissions of pain or need: "Lenora Rand is having this weird eye twitch going on. Please try not to stare, or if you stare at least say something humorous in a supportive kind of way."

Other status updates are recordings of simple moments of grace—moments, that without the prompting from Facebook, I might have just let slip by, unnoticed and unmarked. "Someone once said, 'We are here to learn to bear the beams of love.' Today with the family, it's almost more than anyone can bear."

Writing these little snippets—which some have called "micro-blogging"—

has had an effect I never anticipated. I'm more awake and aware now, more alert to "what's on my mind" and what I'm doing in a given moment. It has become for me a form of meditation, at times a kind of prayer, and always a way of connecting with my

"Torri's date last night turned out to be a convicted felon embroiled in a five-year-long custody battle with an ex he described as 'certifiably nuts.' Go kiss your spouses."

An FB friend from my workplace (someone I see only rarely in person)

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spirit, if only for a few seconds, in the whirlwind of my day.

But that's just the beginning. Not only do I put these status updates out into the world of Facebook, but I also receive updates from all my FB "friends." People may have anywhere from a couple of dozen to hundreds of friends on Facebook, from all kinds of places and moments in their lives—work, church, school, clubs, family. Some of their friends are people they know very well, others are simply casual acquaintances.

An FB friend of mine from church, who has recently started using a dating service, wrote this one day:

confessed that she "is ready to trade in her teenager for something nice, like a massage." Another admitted to being "sad that her father-in-law isn't doing so well, and feels bad she can't be there."

When I read messages like this I often write a supportive comment back (as do many of their other FB friends); at the very least, I say a prayer for them. In the process I end up experiencing what the apostle Paul was writing about in Romans

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12: “Laugh with your happy friends when they’re happy; share tears when they’re down... discover beauty in everyone” (vv. 15, 17, *The Message*).

I’m sure when Paul was writing this letter to the Romans he never envisioned people following his instructions to offer up their daily lives, their eating and sleeping and working and dealing with bad dates and teenagers and boredom by typing a status update in a little box on a website. Neither did he, I suspect, envision people writing comments in response, feeling each other’s pain and sharing each other’s joys through a few words tossed into cyberspace.

Frankly, it isn’t something I envisioned happening when I signed up for Facebook a couple years ago. And I strongly doubt it was something Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, had in mind when he introduced it. But that’s what seems to be happening, perhaps because it’s what we all so desperately need in the midst of our way-too-busy, overbooked, and speed-racing lives. In a way, it’s our version of what my friend Marc used to do when he looked at the names in his address book. We do it because it reminds us that we are part of the larger body of Christ. And that makes us feel better.

I am also coming to believe, as my husband suggested, that this act of updating our status and reading others’ updates can be, for many of us, an important ritual of reflection, of confession, of assurance, of passing the peace. For the thousands of people like me who participate in that act each day on Facebook, it is very powerful and even, at times, quite holy. It’s how we have begun to see our lives more clearly and experience the grace of God in our lives more acutely. It’s how we’ve begun to feel closer to people we used to just whiz by. It’s how we’ve begun to feel less alone, and more known and cared for by others, and ultimately, for me at least, even more known and cared for by God. ■