

Tokyo Man Further Distorts Marriage by Wedding Cartoon Woman

When a 27-year-old man from Tokyo fell in love with and subsequently married an animated character from Nintendo's *Love Plus* video game, we might have expected his bereaved parents or concerned employer or landlady to have called for an ambulance with white-coated paramedics waving straightjackets. But nothing of the sort took place.

Instead, he hosted a full-scale celebration before "a priest, an MC, [and] a DJ" with "photo slideshows, wedding music and even a bouquet." Instead of a week in a medical facility for observation, he went on a honeymoon.

As he explained, "I love this character, not a machine. ... I understand 100 percent that this is a game. I understand very well that I cannot marry her physically or legally."

Yet he found this virtual character "better than a human girlfriend."

"Some people have expressed doubts about my actions," he says, "but at the end of the day, this is really just about us as husband and wife. As long as the two of us can go on to create a happy household, I'm sure any misgivings about us will be resolved."

This rational young man has become a living example of what Internet-addiction expert Hiroshi Ashizake has observed: "Today's Japanese youth can't express their true feelings in reality. They can only do it in the virtual world."

But this malady is not limited to Japan. Nor is it an action without a fallout effect on someone—and not just the draw pile

of eligible young boys available for hopeful girls of this island nation.

The victim here is community.

In recent articles in *Africanus Journal*, I have been speculating on the nature of personhood, marriage and interpersonal relations in a future increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, especially focused in android robotics (simulating human partners in malebots and fembots), as well as disembodied virtual relationships (through the increasing transference of identity into virtual avatars who interact in simulated environments like Internet chat rooms, video games, and meta-erses). The fallout has been the increasing number of real-life divorces naming as the alienating culprit a virtual partner, met, perhaps, in a special interest chat room or in the elaborate, animated virtual metanation Second Life.

The irony is that the offending virtual adulterers may never actually meet in real life, yet the intimate bond of marriage with their spouses in the real world has been supplanted and shattered as irreparably as if they had sneaked off to some sleazy motel with rooms by the hour.

How did we arrive at such a present state of human engagement? Why are we confronting such a future threat to interpersonal relationships? And what on earth can we do about these situations now, before they are epidemic across the globe?

Technology has brought us many blessings, all built on the expansion of communication. Data that once seemed nearly insurmountably impossible to ferret out of unfathomable archives are now simply a right question and a double-click away. Keepsakes and memorabilia we thought were lost irretrievably in the shadowy memories of our past are now displayed on eBay with prices driven down by competition—sometimes cheaper to buy now than we remember they

cost then. Whole virtual communities are built out of interest groups that are global in expanse.

The Internet is all about networking—but the irony is that at the same time it can be isolating.

Let me share one small but, to me, significant example. Years ago, I could pass a sign-up sheet around my classroom and have everyone write down their contact information to add to my roll book. For the last 20 years, despite my pleas, my students have become incapable of passing such a sheet to one another, so that it goes all the way around the room.

This seems like such a minor annoyance, it is hardly worth noticing. I think differently. I believe it is telling me something very serious about their personal skills. I may be training them in what to many may appear to be an abstract discipline—theology—but the point of this topic, as in all their training, is to help them become fully equipped pastors, counselors and lay leaders who can minister to a congregation, a parachurch organization, a client base or a classroom.

What I am perceiving is that they are so used to being at their desks or computer consoles, in their cubicles, working on their laptops, isolated from the cybernaut in the adjoining seat, that libraries, work spaces and classrooms have become, for some of them, merely collections of individuals who are in spatial proximity but not communal propinquity, perhaps relating to someone a world away but essentially ignorant of the person in the next seat. In a classroom of 40, my sign-up sheet may make it as far as the sixth person, but then it sits on someone's desk, filled out but dropped like a new year's resolution into the abyss of forgotten intentions.

Undergirding these isolating or destructive changes are also alterations in the locus of authority to rule on such aberrations. Where in the past, experts were recognized in various fields and sought out to give their ruling on the

truth or advisability of a suggestion or an action, today millions look elsewhere for guidance.

When the highly intelligent actor Stephen Fry, who played P.G. Wodehouse's nearly omniscient fictional character Jeeves the butler on the BBC, can sit down at his blog and find himself influencing the political thinking of a half-million daily readers who have possibly confused him with Wodehouse's character, or when the artistically talented Justin Bieber can film himself in his own home and make himself as big a player on the Internet as the heavily investing entertainment industry could promoting the similarly talented Katy Perry, we observe an authority-making shift. The recognized pundits have been superseded by the individual entrepreneur. This is an empowering reality that makes more space on the playing fields usually dominated by well-moneyed organizations. It has elevated the individual, who can virtually run a successful enterprise on one's own—a solitary organization.

In this way, the Internet has distributed power for us by changing the sources of *information* and hyperspacing niche marketing, thereby altering the sources of *authority*. And while this new empowering authority shift spurs competition and free enterprise, it also encourages individualism.

Today, many of us, instead of wandering next door to hail the neighbors when we find we have a spare moment, fix ourselves before our computers, seeking fellowship from disembodied voices in text more real to us than folks strolling up our street, and thereby create a "community" of isolated individuals whom we may never even meet.

Does this mean we are presently looking at a kind of literary "avatarism" that anticipates the complete breakdown of face-to-face, real-world human interaction and, ultimately, creates the projected technovirgins who prefer machines (e.g., fembots) or game characters as mates over real humans? If so, this is clearly antithetical to what Jesus our Lord intended

as Christian community. And it also ultimately undermines the idea of shared truth, making the decision of what is true Christian doctrine subject to each individual's own self (what is called in philosophy *solipsism*, from the Latin word for *solitary*, *solus*, and the word for *self*, *ipse*, indicating oneself alone as the sole, ultimate ruler on all matters of truth).

The gospel according to me becomes the locus of authority for right doctrine; the First Church of Me becomes the determiner of right Christian practice. No wonder Jesus asked his question to resound down the ages: "When the Son of Humanity (*anthropos*) comes, will he find faith on earth?" It is a sobering thing to note that the question Jesus asks employs *ara*, an "interrogative particle expecting a negative response."

Jesus is not expecting a positive answer. Assessing where the future is headed, we can certainly understand why. And we can also understand what we need to do about that prospect. As His church, we need to address it!

In the Great Commission our Lord left His disciples in Matthew 28:18–19, He commanded us who would follow Him to "go, therefore, make disciples of all unbelievers" (the word here, *ethna*, means "non-Jews, Gentiles, pagans, heathen"). Our task is to network everyone into the gathering of followers that Jesus began in His onsite ministry among us. But that task will not be accomplished if we are content to leave everyone to be isolated individuals, no more interacting than infants in a hospital nursery, each one of us consumed with our own needs in our own tiny bassinet.

The book *Creative Ways to Build Christian Community* is exactly what its title says it is: a very personal, practical response to the present and future prospect of isolation, a treasure trove of examples and suggestions about how to accomplish the Great Commission from community-builders telling how, over the

years and the ministries, they have implemented creative ways to build up churches and organizations to develop more intensive Christian fellowship and, thereby, create community.

Its editors have demonstrated a long-term commitment to community building. Jeanne de Fazio is literally networked around the globe, connecting Christians together, as she divides her year between countries. Rev. John Lathrop has been a pastor for many years and is the communications coordinator between participants of the House of Priscilla and Aquila publishing line of Wipf and Stock, the publishers of this present book. Amassed in the list of contributors is a diverse group of leaders who have been building Christian community for decades. This book shares with you the innovative ideas and practices they have used in hopes you will find it a useful tool in your own ministry. It's timely now, and it will be timely in years to come.

Decades ago, I remember hearing of a survey that asked what were the two primary fears Americans had for this new millennium. The first was in the general sphere, and the answer was concern for the environment. The second was in the personal sphere, and the overwhelming response was loneliness—that each one of us would finally end up alone, our children just pictures on Facebook, disembodied voices in hurried telephone calls on Christmas and birthdays, our spouses or peers dead or isolated in senior care units as far away from us as if they'd been locked up in the dungeons of fortress keeps.

As the future continues to isolate us into solitary individuals, the church of Jesus Christ may very well be the chief architect of face-to-face community. Because of our beliefs in a God who met us face to face and walked among us and calls us to be the body of the Christ, God's anointed One on earth, we may be the only network left standing, able completely to assure humanity that, despite the strides of artificial intelligence, the valuable work of hands, humans

alone are made in the image of God and therefore never obsolete, that we are worth more than a handful of bolts.

Creative Ways to Build Christian Community will continually help remind us of that truth, as it helps us ensure a Christian communal future for humanity as well as a recognizable body of believers for our Lord when He finally comes back to gather us up to himself in God's everlasting arms of love.

Editor's note: This is the preface from Creative Ways to Build Christian Community, edited by Jeanne C. DeFazio and John P. Lathrop, available from .

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