

Eyes Online: Eyes On Life is the only book I have been introduced to that exposes destructive online choices for what they are. It is powerful, with real life accounts. I struggled with pornography and other obsessive behaviors, and recovery was hard. As I read this book, I wished Jan Kern had written it four or five years earlier so it could have helped me at the time of my struggle. For the person who struggles with obsessive online behaviors, this book, along with God's help, will take him or her on a powerful journey to recovery.

— Mike Bowling, aspiring journalist

As those created in God's image, we're made to live in a real world. For one reason or another many teens find themselves spending a great deal of their time and energy living a virtual existence—one that disconnects them from their true design and potential. This book can help awaken teens from the disembodied experience of online life to the fulfillment and joy God intends for them to know.

—Olivia and Kurt Bruner, authors of *Playstation Nation: Protect Your Child from Video Game Addiction*

This book really hit home for me. My problems and my addiction don't seem so uncommon. The feelings of loneliness and not being wanted are not reserved only for me. I see hope. I see a way of change through the interactions and help of others, and more importantly, through God. Now I realize I don't have to be ruled by my addiction or struggle on my own. *Eyes Online : Eyes On Life* has given me hope that I can overcome, that I can do all things through Christ.

—Dean Byrd, student

Jan Kern writes with insight, passion, and wisdom as she chronicles the struggles of young people who have become caught in compulsive Internet use. Her counsel to teens—or anyone else dealing with online obsessive behavior—is grounded in sound Christian principles and benefits from the insights of leading experts in the emerging field of Internet addiction. Teens, parents, and youth pastors everywhere should read this book.

— Andrew Careaga, author, *Hooked on the Net* and *eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation*

Eyes Online : Eyes on Life gripped me by the throat and wouldn't let go. This powerful, compelling story brought me face to face with the Internet struggles of my generation. Armed with practical helps and suggestions, this book helps me feel equipped to come alongside those who are desperately searching for help.

—B.J. Hamrick, freelance journalist

Timely, eye-opening, and extremely practical, *Eyes Online : Eyes On Life* draws out the serious seduction that many kids, especially guys, experience through Internet activities. Every teen or young adult should read Jan Kern's book and pass it on to his or her parents.

—Meg Meeker, physician, author of *Boys Should Be Boys* and *Restoring the Teenage Soul*

Internet obsession is one of many ways that individuals try to fill the void or emptiness caused by a lack of connection to family, friends, and especially God. Jan has done an excellent job capturing the words of Colin and others as they go through the process of becoming disenchanted with their lives and becoming detached from God, their friends, and family. *Eyes Online : Eyes On Life* is a continuation of a series of excellent books that provide a road map for the individual, concerned friend, or family member through the process of recovery. As the author states, it is a courageous journey. I, too, pray that readers take it.

—Thom A. P. Smith, EdD, marriage and family therapist

This was an awesome read. It's tough to find books that challenge you to do better, and I love that about this book. Like a lot of Christian teens, I'd never stopped to consider that maybe I wasn't honoring God with my Internet use. Reading Jan's *Eyes Online : Eyes on Life* has challenged me to view the way I spend my time online through God's eyes. This isn't just a story about Internet addicts—it's a story of redeeming love and what can happen when we let God in.

—Debra Weiss, high school student

EYES ONLINE : EYES ON LIFE





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A LIVE FREE BOOK



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DEDICATION

To my family—Tom, Sarah, Danny, Marci, and “The Ranch” community: Your love, support, and expressions of Christ’s servant nature always keep me pushing forward. You are amazing.

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I CAN QUIT ANYTIME I WANT TO . . .

HI, MY NAME IS TOM, and I'm an addict.

I don't have a problem with the bottle or with any kind of pharmaceutical product, legal or illegal. No, my problem is with games. I'm addicted to them.

When in high school I was obsessed with bowling to the point where, if I saw a group of people standing around, I automatically calculated where I'd need to aim the bowling ball in order to knock them all over. I was a pinball junkie, and then there were Pac-Man, Centipede, and Galaxian. Many a quarter vanished into those games as I sought a quick fix. I then discovered computer solitaire, and I came to rue the day I put that first red "2" over a black ace.

And now the Internet has made this potential to get hooked all too easy. My particular poison these days is online Scrabble. I play a game every day upon getting home from work, and if for some reason I can't I feel a bit agitated. In a previous generation I'd be the dad who comes home from work and pours himself a stiff drink. (I'm glad that looking for the ultimate triple-word score carries fewer potential problems than does alcohol!)

But this raises an important point: A lot of people think the only potential problem with going online is the content of the Web sites themselves. Pornography. Violence. Language.

Sure, we have to be careful about those things, but that isn't a problem in Scrabble. The problem is in the *process*. Hours spent staring into a computer screen reading friends' Facebook pages are hours that are gone forever. So are hours spent on a role-playing game such as World of Warcraft—or Scrabble, for that matter. The very process of going to even “safe” sites may be setting you up for future problems.

Jan Kern has chosen an apt title for this book—*Eyes Online : Eyes on Life*. For increasing numbers of young people, real life is losing out to online life. Whether it's an obsession with online social sites such as Facebook or MySpace, MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) or pornography—often all at the same time—young people find themselves unable to tear away from the computer screen to experience real life. As a result, sports, hobbies, and schoolwork usually suffer.

As with any addiction, the solution first lies in getting the person to admit he or she has a problem. That's what happened in my case. I came to realize that my Scrabble obsession was affecting my home life. So while I still enjoy the game, I'm careful to limit my time staring at the screen.

As you read this book, you'll see that Jan is forthright in discussing the problem, and many readers might recognize themselves in its pages. But Jan shows great compassion for those caught up in one of the newest forms of addiction.

More important, she offers hope and a way out and points readers to the source of that hope: faith in Jesus Christ.

If you know someone who's caught in the snare of Internet addiction, give him or her this book. It might be the first step in breaking free.

—Tom Neven, editorial director,
Focus on the Family Youth Outreach

FACING REALITY . . .

THE INTERNET—it can offer a really great experience, or for some, it can easily become an obsession. Without realizing it, we're sucked into activities that rob us of the amazing identity, resources, and relationships God has in mind for us.

When Colin first got online, he was ten years old. It didn't take long for him to discover a whole new world on the Internet . . . and to fall into its traps. Not everyone gets caught in those. But not everyone who gets caught realizes it, either.

Colin has an honest story to tell, an honest perspective. Being connected online is still part of his daily world, but not in the same way it used to be. He's not afraid to admit where his Internet use took him or the depths of the battles he fought. It takes courage to look at the reality of anything we do that might be harmful and be open about how it impacts us on the different levels of who we are. Colin has that courage.

You might recognize a bit of yourself in his story or the stories of others included in this book. If something about their stories stirs you and challenges you to a different, better place, be assured that God will give you the courage to go there, just as he did for Colin.

Maybe you know someone who needs a closer look into his or her online activities. Use this book—there are lots of suggestion boxes along the way—to consider ways to support and encourage, then walk alongside your friend or family member through the struggles. Offer accountability and mentoring. Colin and others have found that kind of support, and it helped.

Colin's story is very real, so many of the names in the story are also real. In some instances, names have been changed when people have not been available to share their perspective or to give consent to the use of their names. The name of one of Colin's older brothers is included in the book, but another older brother chose to remain unnamed. Also, for privacy, most of the names of those who offered their perspectives and stories in the commentary have been changed.

Names changed.

That happens often online. Roles are played. Identities are masked. The Internet is a huge part of our lives, but I hope you won't ever feel you have to hide your identity when it comes to being honest with God about your online activities. He cares deeply about you—the real you with all your hurts, struggles, and longings.

A prayer you can pray:

God, being online is a part of my daily life. It's really easy to spend time there and get caught up in activities that keep me from being all you created me to be, from doing all that you created me to do. It's especially easy to slide into believing what I do on the Internet doesn't matter so much. Give me the courage to consider where you are leading me about my online choices, and give me the strength to go there. Amen.

Praying for your courageous journey,





one

I felt like the Internet was where I belonged.

COLIN LEANED FORWARD IN HIS CHAIR. The soft creak didn't register, but then neither did the songs playing through his iPod. The images and words on the computer monitor drew his full attention.

Another shooting at a school, this time on a college campus.

Though far away, this one was more devastating than others he'd heard about. He shook his head, studied the monitor. *How did it happen?*

Colin clicked and followed links to site after site and took in more details of the story. Finally, he drew in a breath and sat back in his chair. Still staring at the screen, he slid his desk drawer open and popped out a quirky ball that fit in the palm of his hand. Colin's hands were never still for long. As he pounded the ball from one palm to the other, a red light pulsed from the center of the open, twisted bands of rubber.

**More questions pulsed through his mind.
Emotions flashed. Anger one moment,
sadness the next. Tears burned.
He coughed and swallowed.**

<http://>

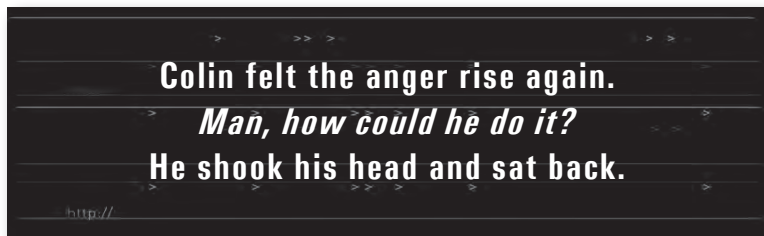
What set the guy off? Didn't anyone see this coming? Could it have been prevented?

More questions pulsed through his mind. Emotions flashed. Anger one moment, sadness the next. Tears burned. He coughed and swallowed.

Colin dropped the ball back into the drawer. A final red blink flickered as he slid the drawer shut. He set an elbow on the desk, leaned his chin into his hand, and with the other hand clicked on a new link.

Some of the victims had run and hidden. Some played dead. The stories were conflicted on details like how many were shot and how many had died, but there were a lot. Even from miles away, it seemed starkly real—not like some video game that people can walk away from.

Colin shuddered. He reached up, pushed his glasses up his nose, and adjusted one of his earphones. As the final notes of a Relient K song faded into a Switchfoot mix, he dropped his hand back to the mouse. He tapped his fingers. He wanted to do something, make a difference . . . But how?



In the quietness of the pause between songs, voices buzzed from another room, shifting his attention. He pulled off his earphones, and the wires dropped around his neck. He heard the phone ring, someone answering. He picked up a pen from his desk and twirled it over his thumb and through his fingers. As

he did, he nodded his head along with the beat of a drumming rhythm he made with his tongue. The sounds around him grew quiet. He looked back at the screen.

What had he been doing? *Oh yeah, the story . . .*

Maybe he'd create a tribute to the victims. A video scenario ran through his mind. He imagined designing the video, accompanying it with a song he'd play on the piano and sing.

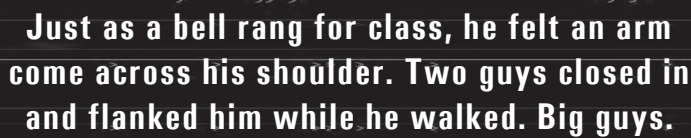
He tossed the pen onto his desk and reread the story on the monitor. A couple more clicks and a link showed a picture of the alleged shooter's face. Colin felt the anger rise again. *Man, how could he do it?* He shook his head and sat back. The eyes of the shooter seemed to stare into his. Then it hit him. The injured and killed weren't the only victims. The guy who shot them was a victim too. A person. Someone he could have known.

Colin swallowed. Could he ever have gotten so desperate, angry, or hurting to do what this guy did—go off and shoot people? Colin shook his head in answer to his own question. But . . . he sure could understand him in a lot of ways. If he were there, walking the hallways with the guy, seeing him on the streets, he would have recognized the signs—the confusion and fear in his eyes, the raw loneliness . . .

Those thoughts sucked him back to a time—not too distant—of his own loneliness. He had felt it for years, like a menacing shadow he couldn't shake. The taunting when he was younger, the uncomfortable feelings of being left out, some of it by his own choice. The kids in elementary school talking about something sexual or getting a cheap thrill by being disrespectful to teachers or bullying other kids. He hadn't wanted to be part

of it. Sometimes he only was because he happened to be the one they were targeting.

Then in junior high, he'd joined in on some of it just to fit in. Or at least to be left alone. The loneliness still followed him from one year to the next, right into high school. He had felt it everywhere—at church, sometimes even at home. But school, that was the worst. He showed up every day and would rather have been anywhere else. Sure, at lunch he hung out with a few friends he knew from band, sometimes laughing and cracking jokes. Mostly he just got through those days, avoiding as much interaction as possible.



**Just as a bell rang for class, he felt an arm
come across his shoulder. Two guys closed in
and flanked him while he walked. Big guys.**

<http://>

Still, there was Lisa. She was nice. They were friends, hanging out during band period and band events. They talked. Sometimes, as friends, held hands or hugged. Then one day, even that friendship was threatened, and he became the target of bullying again. He remembered it well. He was walking between some buildings on campus. The sun's heat pierced his T-shirt. Just as a bell rang for class, he felt an arm come across his shoulder. Two guys closed in and flanked him while he walked. Big guys—bigger than he was, anyway. One—Matt—he'd known from earth science class.

“You’ve been hanging out a lot with Lisa,” Matt had said. The other guy, whose arm squeezed down on him, added, “Yeah,

I don't want to see you hanging around my girlfriend anymore." Colin had pegged these guys as mostly talk, but still able to inflict damage if they wanted. Their purpose was to intimidate, and they had accomplished it big time. As they walked away, his heart beat hard in his chest. He remembered the sickening dread that spread like thick goo in his stomach. It stayed with him through the last couple of class periods of that day.

**He sat there, legs stretched, one foot tapping.
His heartbeat had calmed, but he couldn't
shake the feeling that stuck in his stomach.**

When he got home, he'd skipped his usual routine of grabbing something to eat or drink. He headed straight for his room, dropped his stuff on his bed, and slid into his chair in front of the computer. He sat there, legs stretched, one foot tapping. His heartbeat had calmed, but he couldn't shake the feeling that stuck in his stomach. He scooted his chair toward the monitor and jumped online.

The great escape. That day after school, he knew it would work.

Colin picked up the pen again, tapping it on his knee as his thoughts slid back to the college shooter's face. Maybe that guy had tried to escape too—from fears, loneliness, something. He only needed one good friend. Just one. Someone to tell him he mattered. Someone to listen.

Maybe I could have been that friend.

The video tribute still formed in Colin's thoughts and played through his mind. *Someone to listen*. Would the guy have been willing to talk about what was going on inside? Could lives have been saved? Maybe. Maybe not.

Loneliness. Not a good thing. Not a good thing at all.

Again Colin's thoughts took him back to the day Matt and Lisa's boyfriend had threatened him.

Lisa was one of the few good things about school. When they were talking and laughing together, he could forget how lonely other times of the day or week were.

<http://>

It had felt natural to turn to the Internet to shake what happened. It was where he spent most of his time—especially by the time he was in high school. . . .

Even in the afternoon his bedroom remained mostly dark, except for the glow from the monitor. Lights were off. The blinds were drawn closed. As Colin sat at his computer, he could almost feel the guy's arm across his shoulder, still pressing down. Leave his girlfriend alone? He didn't even know Lisa *had* a boyfriend—at least not one that serious.

Lisa was one of the few good things about school. When they were talking and laughing together, he could forget how lonely other times of the day or week were.

That day his online activities started out simple, innocent. He opened his e-mail, checked his inbox, read a couple of

messages. He clicked on video game bulletin boards and joined a chat about codes and the latest hot video games. While he read those, he IM'd several friends he'd gotten to know online. Maybe he'd tell one of them what happened that day.

The afternoon hours pushed toward dinnertime as he moved away from chatting and got involved in a game of RuneScape. His avatar teleporting across the realm of Gielinor reflected in his glasses. Eyes and mind completely focused, he maneuvered through the fantasy kingdoms, fighting monsters and completing quests. With the background sounds of music and seagulls screeching, he was pulled into a world far away from the guys who'd threatened him, far from the uncomfortable realm of the high school halls and passageways.

Food smells coming from the kitchen made his stomach growl. He ignored it.

"Come eat some dinner," his dad said as he passed Colin's room.

"OK, Dad," he grumbled. Colin shifted and clicked his mouse a few more times to fight off a monster; he got to a safe part of an island and closed the game. He pushed away from his computer. As he stepped into the hallway and then the lighted living room, he blinked a few times to adjust to the brightness. Dad was sitting in front of the TV, already eating.

"I made spaghetti and a salad," Mom said. She was standing at the kitchen counter blending a meal shake for Chris, Colin's older brother, who had mental retardation. Mealtimes were a challenge for Mom, so they often ate wherever, instead of at the dining room table.

"Thanks, Mom. I'll just have a hot dog."

“OK. There’s plenty if you change your mind.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks for making dinner. I’m just not that hungry.” He kept his choices to a few favorites. He knew she wouldn’t press the issue.

His thoughts about the day grew more distant, as if he were walling them up in some forgotten corridor. Not a place he planned to return to—if possible, not ever.

<http://>

Colin warmed his hot dog and bun in the microwave, wrapped it in a paper towel, and headed back to his room. He didn’t want to watch TV tonight. The day’s events too easily pushed into his mind again and got him down. He’d avoid that any way he could. He bit into his hot dog as he settled back into his desk chair.

Outside it had grown darker. The monitor’s soft light cast a glow across his room. Colin took a few more bites and used his free hand to check e-mail and message boards again. As he popped in the last bite, he wiped his hand on his jeans and opened RuneScape to resume his game. His thoughts about the day grew more distant, as if he were walling them up in some forgotten corridor. Not a place he planned to return to—if possible, not ever.

A couple of hours passed quickly. Sounds coming from the other rooms and passing down the hall told Colin that Chris, then Mom and Dad, were heading to bed. Mom and Dad poked their heads in at different times to say good-night.

“Don’t stay up too late, Colin,” Mom said.

“Yeah, OK.” Colin nodded a good-night.

After a little more time passed, Colin checked the quietness of the house. He was sure everyone was asleep by now, but he listened again. Hearing nothing, he turned to other Internet activities he felt might ease the unrest of the day and his loneliness.

A few clicks and . . . he was trapped. No internal alarms went off to warn him of what was coming. The seduction over time had been gradual—jaws clamping down, deceptive, drawing Colin in deeper and deeper.

As I sink in despair, my spirit ebbing away,
you know how I’m feeling,
know the danger I’m in,
the traps hidden in my path.

PSALM 142:3 (*THE MESSAGE*)

A PLACE WITHOUT EXPECTATIONS

The Internet. It was where Colin felt he belonged.

From his early years in school, he had picked up the clear message from others that he was different. He didn’t fit in the way they expected. Later, he struggled with feeling uncomfortable in any social situation. “I had decided it wasn’t OK for me to be social,” he recalled later.

Colin had no huge aspirations to be popular. He looked enough like his peers in his jeans and T-shirts, but generally he

shrugged it off if they thought he didn't have the right look or the right friends. Still, he felt the pressure and grew weary of the bullying. The Internet became the one place the expectations and taunting wouldn't press in on him. He could be himself—or anyone he wanted to be. “All those people online never judged me on my appearance,” he said. “They never saw me. But the people at school saw me daily, and they had me judged before they even knew me.”

In the early years of his Internet use, Colin's online time was monitored and limited by his mom and dad. He wasn't getting into any trouble with it, so as time passed, they checked up on his activities less and less. By ninth grade, when he had his own computer in his room, time online naturally increased. He remembered, “Anytime I was at home, I'd go on the Internet. I'd be there for hours at a time.”

For many, an hour or more online—or even a few hours— isn't a problem. For Colin, one thing led to another. The Internet became the world he preferred. He didn't recognize it at the time, but when he looked back he saw it clearly: “I was so trapped in the Internet world, no person could possibly drag me out.”

Be a patient friend to someone who seems quieter and on the fringes of the group you're involved in. Invite him to join in, but be understanding if he isn't ready. Talk to him about the activities he likes. Keep an open discussion about computer use if that's one of his interests.

You click online and you've just connected to something that has a sense of infinity. No way in a lifetime could you see everything, do everything, talk to everyone. There's always more. It's exciting, stimulating, or just so much a part of your daily world that it's a natural place to spend your time. Online you chat with friends, connect with groups that have similar interests, check e-mail, play games, look up information, shop, and find lots more ways to express your creativity and interests.

The Internet is here to stay, and in the next ten or twenty years it'll likely grow in its capabilities in ways we can't even imagine.

But people like Colin and others have found that, along with all the amazing innovation and positive experiences they've found there, being online also has been a downfall for them—big time. When they're being really honest, they talk about the lines they've crossed. Sometimes without even realizing it, they've been consumed by being online with simple activities like chatting, checking e-mail, blogging, or posting and commenting on blogs. Some have discovered games or activities they can't stop thinking about even when they finally walk away from the computer. Others have ventured onto X-rated sites and found themselves lured by sexual traps that turned into secret addictions.

At fifteen, Mark was often online until three or four in the morning. He spent most of that time just doing normal stuff—looking up information he was interested in, chatting, or reading blogs. Eventually he had a list of thirty blogs that he regularly

read and commented on. Keeping up with that ate up his time. But Mark also found another interest that became consuming. He began to visit a site where he would read sex-related fiction. “I found some of the dark corners of the Internet,” he said.

Melissa got into blogging on a popular journaling site. She found herself returning to the site often to network with others. The line she believes she crossed? “I started writing out my thoughts compulsively every day.” Now she warns, “All things in moderation, and the moment you feel slightly out of control, you’re probably a lot more out of control than you realize, or want to admit.”

Today, you’ll also find Melissa playing one of her favorite online role-playing games, World of Warcraft (WoW). She says it’s fun, and she enjoys the social interaction and creating end goals. But she adds, “It’s really easy to make those goals your focus and ignore your life goals.” She feels everyone who plays has to admit they’ve slipped into doing that at least once.

Mike shared what he feels is crossing the line: “Being online and doing things online isn’t bad in itself, but you need to make sure you’ve got a good grasp on keeping time limits on yourself and making sure that what you’re doing and how much of what you’re doing is healthy.”

This book is about what you’re doing online. It’s also about what’s happening in your life that takes you to those moments where destructive choices are made and lines are crossed. And if you’ve found yourself in one of those moments, it’s about where you go from here.

You don't have to be an expert on computers or the Internet to be a great support person for someone who struggles with online activity. Still, be willing to learn some basic information about the current trends and what teens are into. Do some online research or ask a young adult who's willing to fill you in.

A WARNING METER

You're moving through your day, and suddenly you hear a warning beep so shrill you have to cover your ears. You look down toward your chest, about where your heart is, and you see a meter. It's flashing. You're losing life energy fast, and the decisions you make in the next few moments are crucial. What are you going to do to restore that energy? The next move you make has to be the right one or . . . you die. Game over.

OK, maybe not.

We don't have flashing, beeping meters hanging outside our bodies to warn us of anything. God didn't make us that way. But he did create us with a heart and a conscience that can pretty effectively warn us of dangers and traps we might be walking into—if we stay sensitive and willing to consider his leading.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

Poor in spirit. That condition of the spirit is, in a way, one of our internal warning meters. "But," we might say, "it almost sounds like something is weak or broken." So are we in trouble?

Only if we totally miss that *poor* really *is* the condition of our own spirits. And that it's OK to understand we're in that condition.

Every person has an impoverished spirit, one that's ragged, lacking, and in need of God. But when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he meant that you're in a great place when you're living in a way that recognizes that condition. It can be hard to see yourself that way, but there's something good about it. It's in moments when you fully accept the stark reality of your spiritual need that you clearly see God's love for you and welcome his help in every area of your life.

When we take that truth beyond just a moment of awareness to actually being a part of how we live out each day, we're more likely to bring God along when we go online. He'll help us make choices, and we won't fall for the traps.

God, you see me as an individual, and you love me. You know all my struggles, my hurts, and my weaknesses. And you know the traps I can easily fall into. Help me see and accept the full reality of my spiritual condition and my need for you. Then help me accept your participation in all areas of my life, including what I choose to do with my time online. AMEN.

So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.

JOHN 8:36 (NLT)

GOING DEEPER

- Take a moment to list all of your favorite online activities. Which ones have the potential to become traps for you personally?

- Sometimes we aren't aware that what we're doing is consuming our time or thoughts. For a day or week, track how much time you spend on each of your online activities. Are there any that could be slipping toward being, as Melissa found, out of control?

- While you're online how well are you listening to your internal warning meter? Read John 16:8 and think about how the Spirit works to make us aware of things. What areas of spiritual growth can you bring to God to ask for his help? For instance, hearing God, seeking him for direction, including him more in daily decisions and activities, praying or reading the Bible more.

DEEPER STILL

Take a walk, go for a run, pray and think, or just talk with someone. Whatever you choose, spend some time considering your relationship with God. Ask him to help you see yourself as he does—greatly loved by him, but also very much in need of him.

After you've taken a closer look, spend a few moments writing down what he showed you. Finish by writing a prayer of thanks.