Selfies

Searching for the Image of God in a Digital Age

Craig Detweiler

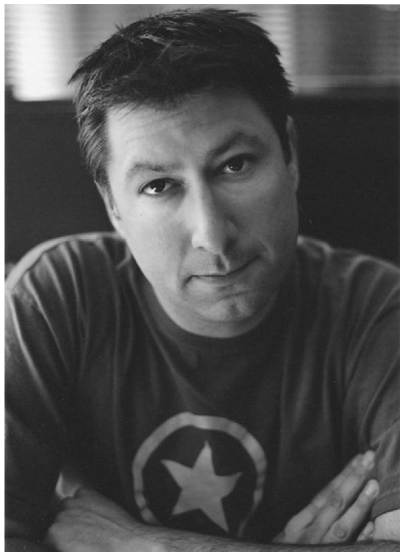
BrazosPress
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Detweiler, Craig, 1964– author.
Title: Selfies : searching for the image of God in a digital age / Craig Detweiler.
Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Publishing Group, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017052602 | ISBN 9781587433986 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Self—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Social media—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Self-portraits.
Classification: LCC BT713 .D48 2018 | DDC 302.23/1—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017052602

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Jen Berry

For Stephen Dickter
1975–2012
Cinematographer, Scholar, Friend

Gone too soon.
We should have written this together.

Contents

Acknowledgments

To my editor, Bob Hosack, who has the patience of Job and the persistence of Nehemiah. Without your encouragement, I never would have started this project (or completed it). To Brian Bolger, Brandy Scritchfield, Jeremy Wells, Shelly MacNaughton, and the Brazos Press team, who get the job done with minimal drama. Such service is increasingly rare and refreshingly independent in a corporatized world.

To the many cities, schools, churches, and conferences that hosted my extended *iGods* tour. Your earnest and urgent questions regarding how to navigate the accelerated moment we find ourselves in have challenged me to dig deeper and write faster (two things that do not necessarily go together).

To my colleagues at Pepperdine University, Michael Feltner and Kendra Kilpatrick, who granted the sabbatical to finish this book, and Sarah Stone-Watt, John Mooney, Michael Smith, and John Sitter, who protected and preserved my time zealously.

To my students, who are the canaries in our cultural coal mine. We armed you with a constant companion that did not include an owner's manual. My apologies that as digital natives, you've had to do most of the work (while we've watched with a disapproving eye). You make me remarkably hopeful.

To my essential readers, Kathryn Linehan and Gus Peterson. Where do you turn when you're lost among words on the page? To faithful friends willing to offer both affirmations and hard truths.

To the photographers, artists, and friends who allowed me to publish their images in this book. Thank you for exercising such faith and courage in putting yourselves out there to model how much healthy selfies can communicate. May your faces continue to shine.

To my family, who have borne the brunt of my late nights and sheltered weekends. Thank you to Zoe and Theo for answering my questions with boundless enthusiasm. You have been vital teachers and inspirational media leaders. Keep up the creative work.

All honor to Caroline for being my ever faithful, ongoing conversation partner. Forgive me for disrupting your sleep. I have so much gratitude for all of your unattributed suggestions, ideas, and corrections. I offer my ongoing appreciation for your keen eyes, sharp ear, and winsome smile.

1

Introduction

How Do You Solve a Problem Like the Selfie?

> I have always wanted to be me without making it difficult for you to be you.
>
> —Howard Thurman[1]

Did you see the "Smiling Selfie in Auschwitz"? An American teenager touring Auschwitz stirred up a firestorm of criticism when she posted a picture of herself smiling amid a concentration camp (and even included a blushing smiley face emoticon). Her Twitter handle, "Princess Breanna@PrincessBMM," played into so many stereotypes of the millennial generation as entitled, spoiled, and insensitive. The iPhone earbud dangling in her photo only enhanced the notion that she was drifting cluelessly through a Nazi death camp to a private soundtrack, trampling the memory of those snuffed out in such a horrific genocide. To many, her selfie communicated ahistorical insensitivity, her smile seemingly mocking the six million lives lost under the Nazis' horrific genocide. Breanna was lambasted across social media (and traditional media outlets). As her

infamy grew, the Alabama teen tweeted, "I'm famous, ya'll."[2] The outrage was swift and unsparing.

My family was in Europe when this online debate exploded. We were teaching at a summer program in London. Thanks to my book *iGods*, I was invited by CNN to comment on the controversy for their *Belief Blog*. It was obvious that the student's reaction (and even her efforts to explain her reasons for smiling) were not easily defended. She talked about connecting with her deceased father through the experience. They had studied the Holocaust together just before he passed away. While most wondered, "What kind of monster could walk through gas chambers and come away smiling?" I saw a teen, perhaps still in personal grief, connecting with her father across time. Rather than attack, I chose to offer a defense of this teenager who was being grilled across the Twitterverse.[3]

We'd taken our children to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin just days earlier. Our kids were eager to tour the Anne Frank House. Though they had been introduced to Anne's poignant *Diary of a Young Girl* in school, they had become even more interested in her home thanks to its appearance in John Green's young adult novel *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). The book portrays two teens, Hazel and Gus, who fall in love while battling cancer. They travel to Amsterdam in search of a famous author who inspired Gus. The house where Anne Frank hid from the Nazis serves as the backdrop for a romantic first kiss between Hazel and Gus in the novel (and the 2014 movie). While Anne's fascination with movie stars is documented in the glamour shots still pinned to the walls, some appropriately questioned whether kissing in the Anne Frank House was insensitive.[4] Hazel herself struggles with whether kissing in such a historic place is insensitive to Anne's memory as a Holocaust survivor. She ultimately rationalizes that Anne enjoyed teen romance within that house and surely might be pleased that others would dare to pursue love in the same place.

In Berlin, while my family pondered the enormity of the Holocaust at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, others played hide-and-seek amid the tomblike stelae. We took photos, but we didn't run around with childlike abandon. The gravity of the place weighed heavily on our hearts. At the Jewish Museum in Berlin, we were haunted by the Holocaust

Tower. When the door closed behind us with a thunderous boom, the huge, oppressive walls and darkness bore down upon us. Yet we also watched countless school groups cruise in, take a quick pic, and hop out. To them, the memorials were a backdrop for yet another selfie.

Should we be encouraged that so many young people were touring these memorials? Or outraged that they didn't know how to act properly in a place steeped in so much suffering and pain? They grabbed the requisite tourist snapshot but may not have grasped where they were, what they were surrounded by, or what opportunities for reflection were present. They fell into a trap described eloquently by poet T. S. Eliot: "We had the experience but missed the meaning."[5] How many times have I been guilty of cruising through an ancient ruin or a famous museum in search of the requisite shot, the approved tourist photo? It is far too easy to treat the world as a stage dressed for our best selfie. We can sleepwalk through places and experiences designed to move us and come away with selfies that distracted us from our setting, blinded us to the transcendent or eternal.

But who needs to wake up whom?

I feel like the responsibility for explaining the gravity of Auschwitz falls upon those who've gone before Breanna. In the Bible, God repeatedly urges his people, "Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past" (Deut. 32:7). In his autobiographical *Night*, survivor Elie Wiesel reminds us why we must continue to teach and speak and visit horrific places like Auschwitz: "For in the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and, of course, its consequences."[6] Miroslav Volf writes that "if no one remembers a misdeed or names it publicly, it remains invisible."[7] How can we convey solemnity to a generation that never experienced the Holocaust? There are many forms of teaching.

Israeli artist Shahak Shapira crafted a creative and confrontational response to inappropriate selfies posted at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.[8] He photoshopped the most insensitive photos taken at the Berlin memorial onto historical images from the concentration camps. The YOLO (you only live once) spirit of the contemporary selfies was juxtaposed with the haunting reality of piles of Jewish bodies discovered at the conclusion of World War II. Shapira posted his examples of public shaming online at Yolocaust.de. He included an email address where these worst offenders could ask Shapira to remove their embarrassing image. Within one week, 2.5 million people had visited the Yolocaust.

Shapira noted, "The crazy thing is that the project actually reached all 12 people whose selfies were presented. Almost all of them understood the message, apologized and decided to remove their selfies from their personal Facebook and Instagram profiles." A gentleman who captioned his photo with "Jumping on dead Jews @ Holocaust Memorial" asked for forgiveness: "I have seen what kind of impact those words have and it's crazy and it's not what I wanted. . . . And I am sorry. I truly am."[9] Shapira honored such surprising changes of heart by removing the Yolocaust site altogether. Pain caused by offensive selfies was transformed via repentance.

Questions of what spaces or occasions are sacred aren't limited to instances of genocide. A quick internet search for "inappropriate selfies" reveals all kinds of lapses in judgment, including smiling selfies with the deceased at funeral parlors. Perhaps these young people haven't been taught that when a Jewish family gathers to sit *shiva* following the burial of the deceased, mirrors in the house are covered. It is a time of introspection. Prayers and focus are to be directed toward God, not ourselves. Crowds that turn their backs to masterpieces in order to snap a selfie with a Van Gogh have vexed art museums and curators. In front of the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre or *Starry Night* at the Museum of Modern Art, plenty of visitors are looking *away* from the painting, more interested in themselves on their screens.[10] Contemporary artist Kara Walker anticipated how people would interact with her massive installation *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) at a former Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn.[11] A seventy-five-foot sculpture of an African American mammy with the naked body of an Egyptian sphinx is anything but subtle. This African figure is composed of refined white sugar, a bracing commentary on economic and sexual exploitation of black women in America. Signs encouraged visitors to post pictures of their experience with the hashtag #karawalkerdomino. Walker knew that a ten-foot-tall vagina would prompt insensitive reactions from visitors because "human behavior is so mucky and violent and messed-up and inappropriate."[12] How should we respond to our complicated feelings about identity, race, power, gender, sexuality, and the sacred?

After thousands of people clicked and commented on my CNN article about Auschwitz, I realized that we desperately need places to process our conflicted thoughts about selfies. Our intense relationships with our

phones seem to have only exacerbated our frustrations with each other. We haven't sorted out a code for digital decorum. What is sacred amid so many selfies? The digital era has disrupted so many established industries and traditions. Institutions are scared. Civic and religious leaders feel threatened. Social media is creating epistemological problems and raising foundational questions: What is truth? What sources can be trusted? As our culture boils, most of us have retreated to our phones. We are so busy broadcasting ourselves that we have no time to worry about our neighbors. We tell our children to be patient and loving and kind, but we haven't figured out what that means in our online activities. With devices in hand, we all too easily treat others as a position or a problem rather than as a person. We may acknowledge this is a problem, but few of us have the time, energy, or resources to propose a solution, to mine our spiritual and ethical resources in search of rehumanizing precedents. We will not rise above our political divide until we recognize the glory and dignity of each other on (and off) line. Digital discipleship is a new concept, still being sorted out.

One point of agreement seems to be that selfie takers are selfish. We blame our devices, but mostly we blame each other. "Kids today . . ." "In my time . . ." "We never . . ." A survey of college students joined the chorus, calling selfies "arrogant, self-absorbed, disgusting, degrading, ridiculous, vapid, useless, selfish, shameless, vain and hedonistic."[13] We chastise ourselves for self-interest, even while we're posting. A cycle of self-loathing follows. Some Facebook friends of mine suggested they'd never be interested in a book about such a superficial subject. The word "selfie" is perceived so negatively, even as passé. The Chainsmokers satirical dance single, #Selfie, gave us ample reasons to hate those who exclaim, "But first, let me take a selfie."[14] And yet I pressed on, energized by what I've studied and encouraged by what I've discovered.

Because they are a recent phenomenon, selfies have only begun to be studied by researchers. The iPhone 4 debuted in 2010. By including a front-facing camera, Apple enabled users to see (and photograph) themselves more easily than ever before. A quick "click" and iPhone owners could share their image far and wide. By 2013 the word "selfie" had become so ubiquitous that the Oxford English Dictionary proclaimed it "the word of the year." Art critic Jerry Saltz defined it this way: "A fast self-portrait, made with a smartphone's camera and immediately distributed

and inscribed into a network, [a selfie] is an instant visual communication of where we are, what we're doing, who we think we are, and who we think is watching."[15] Parents and teachers have been flummoxed by how quickly the smartphone has captured adolescents' attention. Teens have been handed a potent tool without an operating manual. Never have so many been able to reach so many so quickly. Smartphones have remarkable democratizing power. They also have the ability to surveil the public like never before. More diverse voices are being heard and more colorful faces seen. And yet algorithms may be splintering us into smaller and smaller groups of like-minded people. A new tribalism may emerge that threatens democratic ideals. We are still trying to figure out how to respond to this powerful and prolific form of communication. Could a deeper appreciation of selfies renew our affirmation of everyone's God-given dignity and worth?

I wade into the maelstrom as parent and professor. Smartphones and selfies are ever present in my home and classroom. I'm not sure what to think about them. They can be a distraction and also a delight. To sort out my own ambivalence, I will merge research from classicists, art historians, psychologists, and communication professors with my training as a theologian and visual storyteller. I may end up with a book that frustrates experts in their field, but my aspirations are to offer an alternative route into a conversation regarding social and technological shifts that impact us all. Consider this an exercise in theological aesthetics—how to see more clearly, reflect more deeply, and respond more perceptively.

Are Selfies Dangerous?

Taking a selfie may be an act of genuine joy. We may want to preserve a private moment of victory or pleasure to relish and recall. It may be just a reminder for us. We may want to lock in our minds a time of deep satisfaction. Photographs have always been a way to commemorate a major rite of passage: weddings, births, graduations. To these major life transitions we may now add a concert, a game, a vacation, a retreat. These peak experiences are distinguished from the more mundane days that tend to blend together. Some of us are actively trying to find beauty amid the mundane. We pause to capture a perfect cappuccino or an especially exquisite pizza. I am all for private moments of profound gratitude. Surely these are central

Matt Benton

Atop Mount Theilsen

to the gift of life. As the wise writer of Ecclesiastes encourages us, "Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do" (9:7).

Selfies have been proven to be far more than a threat to civility and sacred spaces. They can undermine our health and well-being. Selfies can be dangerous. A Spanish man was gored to death when he tried to take a selfie amid the running of the bulls in Pamplona. A fifteen-year-old in India photographing himself holding his father's gun died when he accidentally pulled the trigger instead of pushing the photo button. Two Polish parents taking a selfie stepped off ocean cliffs in Portugal and tumbled to their deaths in front of their children. We can get cut off from our surroundings, lose focus, and suspend judgment in pursuit of the perfect picture. It was widely reported that in 2015 more people died from taking selfies than from shark attacks.[16] How much risk will you assume to get the ultimate selfie on a mountaintop, in front of a train, or with a wild animal? The blind pursuit of the perfect image, ignoring our surroundings and context, can have grave consequences.

Have you seen the extreme selfies of Russian daredevils Kirill Oreshkin and Alexander Rusinov taken atop skyscrapers?[17] They constantly aspire

to new heights, taking on new risks, in search of even more death-defying selfies. How do their pictures make you feel? Dizzy and disoriented? Exhilarated and alive? Do we admire their bravery or shake our heads at such risky behavior? I appreciate the audacity of those in search of an extreme selfie. *National Geographic* celebrated how "the selfie generation gets outside."[18] The pursuit of peak experiences may involve getting back to nature, from scaling a mountain to fording a rushing river with a GoPro strapped to our heads. Images on Instagram may inspire us to get off road, to dive off cliffs, to explore glorious national parks. The Russians' frightening feats provoke mixed feelings and high anxiety. We may understand why they took the #bestselfieever but wish they would stop. We hope they realize the enduring truth that "pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 6:18) before it is too late.

Our conflicted thoughts reflect the mixed feelings we have about selfies. Sometimes we admire the ingenuity; on other occasions we condemn such grandstanding. We may loathe the duck faces gathered on Instagram or love the spontaneity that accompanies Snapchat. We may be happy for our friends' peak experiences but envy them at the same time. How many of us have wanted to break a tourist's selfie stick in two? Selfies are loved and hated with equal intensity. As we've seen with Princess Breanna, a pose struck out of personal satisfaction may be received as an offensive boast. Did you follow the shaming of sorority girls that were caught on camera taking selfies during an Arizona Diamondbacks baseball game?[19] The male television announcers bemoaned "every girl locked into their phone." "Oh, Lord." "Welcome to parenting 2015; they're all just completely transfixed by the technology." They mock their "selfie with a hot dog, selfie with a churro, selfie just of a selfie." The announcers conclude, "Help us, please, somebody, help us! Can we do an intervention?" Online condemnation was also swift: "They have the combined IQ of a burnt tater tot." Afterward, it was discovered that the D-backs' stadium announcer had just asked the crowd to take selfies as part of a contest/promotion. There is always so much more to the story.

I wonder if the disdain we unleash upon sorority girls taking selfies actually reveals disdain for young women in general. Our comments regarding selfies may unmask our misogyny. Are we too quick to judge the selfie generation, a generation that has never been taught to think critically about what the act of taking a self-portrait and posting it on the

internet entails? The online outrage we unleash upon adolescents belies the patience promoted by the apostle Paul. In Romans 10:14 he resists the temptation to condemn others: "But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?" (NLT). We have been quick to condemn and slow to listen (or see).

Adolescents have been offered a license to post without any accompanying ethical framework. Is it fair to blame teens for misusing tools that didn't exist in our childhood? If I had been given a phone with an ability to take and post pictures when I was thirteen, I would not have photographed many things to be proud of. What kinds of public mistakes would I have made if emboldened by this new possibility? We are now all engaged in what sociologist Erving Goffman calls "the arts of impression management."[20] Thanks to social media, adolescents are often forced to grow up in public at earlier ages and stages. They are embarking upon an ancient challenge, to know thyself, while broadcasting each awkward step along the way. Is it fair to criticize the young for not acting more maturely?

Today's pings are just a more sophisticated version of *Pong*. As one of the original video games, *Pong* was slow, methodical, even predictable. And yet we loved it. *Pong* didn't require much sophistication. The speed could be shifted, but the rules remained the same. Hit it back. The game could be locked in place, stuck in an endless loop. One could walk away for a while and nothing would change. Take an eye off the screen, a hand off the controller, and one may not even lose a point. Today's teens are playing ping, not *Pong*. Pings are those beeps and blurps that tell us we have a new message, a new update, a new headline to consider. Pings are the notifications that float across our screen all day long. They are rooted in instant messaging and constant connection.

Nowadays, we *all* assume that we are *all* available at *all* times, and we *all* expect (maybe even demand) an immediate response. Parents may panic if their teens fail to respond to a text message asking for an update. Relationships may end if we fail to respond to our friends' online drama in a timely manner. To opt out is often to drop out of that social circle. We may be permanently removed from the group chat. Nobody wants to break a Snapchat streak. *Pong* involved one ball on one screen. Ping

KayKay Blaisdell

Focus

involves multiple balls and can be played across multiple screens. To keep up with Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter takes an enormous amount of attention. Responding to so many simultaneous pings can be stressful—perhaps far more stressful than we realized when we handed a thirteen-year-old their first smartphone.

We made sure our children had our number in case of emergency. But after that, it was simply learn by doing. The pings come in the form of red dots or flashing lights. They're numbered. The job of young people is to respond to the pings in a timely and satisfying manner—*for the rest of their lives*. That can be an overwhelming inbox for a tween to handle. It might even leave them feeling a bit stressed out. The game we've placed teens within—your worth can and will be measured in hard numbers

of friends, followers, and likes—never ends. It is always on, even when they're taking the risky move of not paying attention. Conversations and rankings are occurring even while we sleep. We can plunge off the social cliff if we don't keep our eye on the bouncing ball of pings and pongs. Some parents expect an immediate response to their texts and yet complain when their children's faces are buried in their phone. Talk about a double bind.

The greatest danger selfies pose may be not to our bodies but rather to our souls, our psyches, our selves. When we make our private moments public, something volatile may occur, as Princess Breanna discovered. Thanks to social media, our selfies become an occasion for a public referendum. Our friends and followers can now vote on our appearance, adding commentary, even forwarding it on to others. Our private moments veer quickly toward public property, fair game for memes and repurposing in a myriad of ways. While it can be gratifying to feel the affirmation of the crowd, it can also be devastating when our posts fail to generate the kinds of attention we seek. When we post a selfie, we put ourselves out there, into the social stream, to sink or swim. We may subject ourselves to far more judgment and cruelty than is healthy or sustainable. We may adapt our identities to conform to the social standards already established on Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter. While it is great to develop a strong sense of aesthetics (for Instagram) or humor (for Snapchat) or newsworthiness (for Twitter), each of these platforms may limit or box in our developing personas. Where do we find a core identity that is poised to endure the ups and downs of being "hearted" or "unhearted" online?

We may we turn to social media to bolster our self-image. Selfies are a convenient way to ask, Who am I? Yet we need a more reliable source for our confidence and courage than each other. How do we process darker moments of doubt or sorrow or confusion? Where do we post those feelings? Is there an app for that? This book will challenge readers to go deep, to lean into the feelings that may lurk behind or beneath our selfies. We may question whether we are smart, pretty, or desirable. We may battle feelings of inadequacy. Who hasn't struggled with loneliness or belonging? We will investigate why researchers have found that Instagram is the worst app for young people's mental health.[21] We will turn to psychology and sociology, art and literature, theology and Scripture to anchor our

understanding of ourselves. My hope is that we will turn to God as the source of our self.

This book will also ask collective questions about where we are heading. Studying selfies is one way to ask, Who are we? Almost forty years ago, Christopher Lasch derided "the culture of narcissism" creeping into American life.[22] Almost twenty years ago, Robert Putnam lamented the decline of civic activity and the ways in which we are now "bowling alone."[23] Those who insist we are even more self-centered today might point to how the titles and focus of our popular magazines have shifted, as photographer Fred Ritchin notes: "I always use a quote by Paul Stookey (of the singing group Peter, Paul and Mary) about popular magazines. They used to be called *Life* (about life), then it was *People* (not about life, but just about people), then it was *Us* (not even about all people, but just about us), then it was *Self* (not even about us). It's a question of how we extend ourselves into the world."[24] As we have focused further on our own image and needs, we may have lost fundamental notions of what "we the people" means. My anecdotal experience of teens suggests that they may not inherently want an education, a church, and a media that is "all about them." Yet those who've come before us have increasingly asked, What's your status? At the end of our efforts to self-actualize has arisen an identity crisis. Our ability to update our profile pictures ad nauseam hasn't resulted in more security. Instead, it has riddled us with questions: How do I look? Do people like me? Does anybody care?

So much of the anxiety swirling around social media arises from a crisis of identity. We are uncertain who we are and whose we are. We are unclear on an individual and a collective level. Philosopher Charles Taylor chronicled how "the sources of the self" have shifted across human history.[25] We have made an inward turn, seeking to define ourselves within a natural world that may reveal a moral order. We recognize that humans have rights without necessarily knowing where those rights spring from. As work has become more mechanized, we have turned toward ecstatic experiences to transcend the mundane. The technological era has ushered in instantaneous communication, generating unparalleled wealth *for some*. The iGods of Silicon Valley have prospered, but those who cannot keep pace with the changes feel left behind. The apocalyptic visions springing from the mouths of politicians around the globe have capitalized on this sense of uncertainty. I am almost old enough to recall the last time

Americans struggled through massive social upheaval. Not since the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and *Easy Rider* have we seen such a clash between generations and ideologies. Thanks to the ubiquity of smartphones and our ability to broadcast our thoughts and images, tensions are rising again. Interestingly, they may be arising for similar reasons. We are seeing and hearing more from the same groups who sparked tumult in the sixties—youth, women, minorities. Media ownership may still be concentrated among a few white males, but the ability to be seen and heard is now available to (almost) all. Is our current culture war rooted in a hatred of selfies or in a disdain for particular faces now showing up and speaking out?

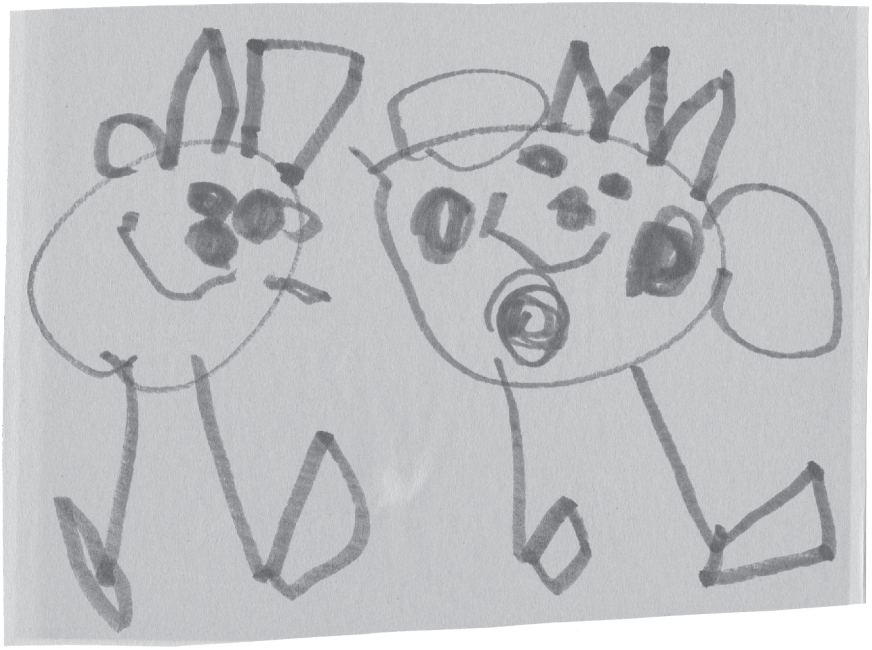
One way to define identity is by the via negativa: "who we aren't." In theology, the via negativa is an opportunity to clear our minds of misconceptions. It begins as an act of humility, acknowledging how much we don't know about God. Lately we have mostly applied the via negativa to others as a form of comparison: "Thank God I am not like them." We may judge others solely upon appearances. Selfies can devolve into occasions for envy or spite. We know we should be happy for our friends' promotions, marriages, cars, vacations, and kids, but sometimes it is tough to love their wonderful lives. The apostle Paul insists, "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (2 Cor. 10:12). When we need perspective, let us look toward God rather than our smartphones. In theology, the *via negativa* wisely speaks of God as ineffable, immutable, and wholly other. St. Thomas Aquinas declares, "This is the ultimate in human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know Him."[26] This realization allows us to respect the impenetrable mystery of God and softens us in relation to our neighbors. Imagine the transformation that may occur if we approach social media with humility rather than hostility. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, "How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it."[27]

Identity can also be found by whom or what we embrace—a *via positiva*. When we focus upon what we know of God—the glory of God's creation, the sacrificial love of Jesus, the indwelling of the Spirit—we may respond with praise and thanksgiving. Joy and gratitude may reign. Our identity can spring from a place so robust that we can operate out of faith rather than fear. "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and

self-control" (2 Tim. 1:7 ESV). We must resist the temptation to define ourselves tribally, to divide the world into mine versus yours. Selfies can be used to establish borderlines, to keep some out and let others in. But strength does not arise from only huddling with people who look like us, dress like us, agree with us. I hope we will summon a strength above and beyond ourselves that allows us to venture out with confidence and compassion rather than fear. We can love and appreciate others because we know that we are loved and affirmed by God.

The Search

This is a study of our self-portraits. It is an exploration of why we paint, sculpt, write, analyze, and photograph ourselves. From an absurdly early age, we start to portray ourselves on paper. Kids render themselves as a hamburger on stilts. We love when children place themselves in the world, with a sun in one corner, maybe some grass, a dog, some form of shelter, and hopefully a parent or two close by. We may put these early self-portraits on



Zoe Detweiler

Self-portrait by Zoe, age 3

the refrigerator or even frame them. On the back, parents make a note, "Zoe, self-portrait, age 3." So why do we affirm this carefree activity as natural but condemn such self-imaging as narcissistic when it involves a camera on a smartphone? Aren't they aids for navigating important developmental stages?

Why do we portray ourselves? We want to be remembered, to have our presence noted. We post so many selfies for similar reasons, mostly having to do with this side of paradise. We want to be recognized, to be noticed, to feel loved and adored. So much of our online activity is about being seen, singled out, affirmed. We fuss and fret over our self-image because we know that it is how we will be introduced to large swaths of the world. In a globalized economy, before people meet us (in person), they are likely to see us (online). And if we connect in real life (IRL), we will probably follow up that meeting with some form of mediated communication (from texting to Facebook to LinkedIn). We are our online profile—with all the accompanying pressure, possibilities, and limitations associated with it.

We take selfies for many reasons, from documenting our lives, to promoting our products (which may include our self and our services) to keeping up with our families. When we post a selfie we connect with the world beyond ourselves. Selfies are a form of visual query. We hope to elicit a reaction. Psychologist Sherry Turkle writes poignantly about how for kids raised by parents attached to their phones, "Longed for here is the pleasure of full attention, coveted and rare."[28] We so rarely give (or receive) undivided attention. Who cares enough to turn off their notifications or even power down in order to be fully present in your life? We all want to be noticed. Selfies are a way to see and be seen. Even when we scroll through others' posts, we are noting who is liked and what is loved. Mother Teresa noted, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other—that man, that woman, that child is my brother or my sister. If everyone could see the image of God in his neighbor, do you think we should still need tanks and generals?"[29]

We are in the midst of an identity crisis both as individuals and as a larger community. We are uncertain who we are. Are we kind, sensitive, and caring? Gorgeous, beautiful, and alluring? Powerful, chiseled, and victorious? Fun, carefree, and adventurous? Our selfies suggest that we'd like to check "all of the above." When it comes to race, gender, and sexuality, the categories get even more complicated and the debates much more heated. When a young African American–Thai woman falls in love with

a nonbinary Latinx, a retired, red-blooded, American cisgender male may have difficulty sorting out what the proliferation of identifiers for these shifting identities means. The confusion and frustration of older generations has manifested in highly combustible ways. When we're unfamiliar with what we're seeing, we will likely have difficulty understanding. Yet rather than taking our dissonance as an opportunity for reflection, we may turn it into an occasion to rant or lash out across the gulf. We take to social media in search of our selves, our community, our sanity. Some see our selfies as a convenient and communicative art; others find them utterly appalling. But we must remember that seeing and hearing clearly are prerequisites for followers of Jesus. I am trying to perceive and receive selfies as the face of God.

Our identity crises usually begin with the question, Who am I? The Bible begins with the question, Who is God? The Spirit of God hovers over the waters in the beginning of creation (Gen. 1:2). We catch a glimpse of this creative Spirit when God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness" (v. 26). Further clarity arrives when the Bible reiterates "created" three times, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (v. 27). A plural God creates a plural people. We are made to be in relationship, in community. This call to community challenges our hyper-individualistic ways and also challenges masculinized notions of God. The rigorous work of Elizabeth A. Johnson expanded my understanding of the wonder of God. She writes, "If women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in as full or limited a way as God is imaged in male ones."[30] We (not just we who are "he") are God's best answer to the question, Who is God? Yet the trinitarian nature of God, Jesus, and the Spirit also challenges us to seek more than just earthly relationships. Cambridge professor Sarah Coakley considers how "twoness, one might say, is divinely ambushed by threeness."[31] While it is wonderful to be in relationship with each other, our desires still draw us toward something More, found in the mystery of the Trinity.

Rather than seeing selfies as the problem, I approach selfies as the start of a solution. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton sought to "justifie the wayes of God to men."[32] I am endeavoring to point the ways of men and women to God. When we're taking selfies, we are searching for identity and seeking a response from each other. We focus upon ourselves and then send our

selfies into the larger community. We may seek affirmation, recognition, and even eternity. Selfies are a search for God via God's image: us. When we search for beauty or identity, we are longing for God. When we seek love and affirmation, we are longing for God. And when we post pictures of ourselves being silly or smart or even sexy, we are longing for God. This book reaches back to our genesis, to the radical notion that we are created in the image and likeness of God, the *imago Dei*. As we rediscover that God (and not we ourselves) made us, we may shift how we see ourselves, how we treat our neighbors, and how we care for creation. We are relational people made in the image of a relational, Triune God.[33] Instead of "taking selfies" in a possessive way, perhaps we can "receive" selfies as a sacred gift from the original Giver. Making images is a deeply soulful, generative activity. The beauty of God's creation (us) and the joyous gift of life inspire our best selfies.

Behind all the social, psychological, educational, and economic reasons why we may be taking selfies, we are seeking relationships with God, with each other, and with our selves. The mania we bring to self-imaging via social media may be directly proportional to our hunger for the divine. French philosopher Blaise Pascal identified this craving, this helplessness, as rooted in what was once true happiness but now remains only an empty print or trace. He described the frantic nature of one who "tries in vain to fill [this emptiness] with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself."[34] Is social media a frustrating search for help that only has one solution? When we overdo the self-serving, self-promoting possibilities of Instagram or Twitter, it can get ugly. Really ugly. But English mystic Julian of Norwich said, "Sin is behovely." She considered sin useful, even necessary, "because it brings us to self-knowledge—knowledge of our own fallibility—which in turn moves us to seek God."[35] Psychologist Dan Allender notes how "every person enjoys dignity and suffers from depravity. The structure of personality is a result of the interaction of these two dynamics."[36] Coakley considers desire as central to our humanity: "the precious clue woven into the crooked human heart that ever reminds its relatedness and its source."[37] In other words, our search for love and connection points to the nature of our origins in relationship to God. We will study the

history of self-portraits in an effort to promote reflection upon our own selfies. As we develop self-knowledge and self-awareness, I hope we will begin to recognize the ways in which we are the image of God despite our frailty, fearfulness, anxiety, and sin. Our self-images may have been fractured by bad experiences at home, at school, on the job, online, or even in our churches. Thankfully, self-images can be restored. Our selfies can be redeemed. May we cast aside our old, manic, false selfies in order to put on a new selfie, in Christ and for the community.

Methodology: Eyes to See

My methodology begins with watching and listening. What are people saying and singing and doing? A selfie may be a cry for help from the depths. A post may spring from a desire to be noticed, a longing to be affirmed. The "Smiling Selfie in Auschwitz" arose from personal pain: the death of a father. To make it to Germany was a life goal for Breanna, an opportunity to reconnect with one she loved and lost and longs to see again. The selfie may shout "Look at me!" but who is the intended audience? She posts for her father, who is in heaven, hopefully smiling down on her, seeing her acknowledgment of his ongoing influence and presence in her life. It also may be an address to God in heaven for carrying her this far through a heavy season of grief. Selfies may be insensitive and inappropriate attention-grabbing devices. But whenever a child shouts, "Mom! Dad! Look at me!" what is the appropriate response?

Much of Jesus's ministry focused on developing eyes to see and ears to hear. He wants followers dialed in to their surroundings, aware of what's happening in their community. How do we recognize the opportunities in front of us and make the right choices about who or what to pay attention to? Jesus was embedded within a religious culture that had clear codes regarding what was appropriate and what was forbidden. There was a hierarchy of laws designed to keep God's people clean and above reproach. Jesus wondered, What about the people getting crushed by that system? Don't we need to see them too? Breanna got vilified on the internet with lightning speed. Her post clearly violated the sensibilities of the masses. But how do we bring her into a new ethical understanding? Through condemnation? We see the patience of Jesus in how he handles those who interrupt his journey, cut into his

plans, derail his destination. While his disciples worry about staying on schedule, Jesus seems eager to pause, to focus on the person begging to be noticed.

Why is Princess Breanna smiling in her selfie? She spoke of it as correspondence with her deceased father, but still—her father's dead, she's touring Auschwitz, and she's smiling? Does her smile mask a deeper truth? After surveying an incredibly diverse cross section of college students across America, Donna Freitas found "the most pressing social media issues students face: the importance of *appearing* happy"—and not just happy, students told her, but "blissful, enraptured, even inspiring." Almost 75 percent of students surveyed agreed that "I try always to appear positive/happy with anything attached to my real name."[38] Freitas calls this vexing dilemma "the happiness effect." Breanna has lost her father, tours a death camp, and yet, due to social expectations, has almost no option other than to smile (and include a happy face emoji). In grief, teens put on a brave face. In disappointment, adolescents act inspired. In crisis, the next generation appears blissful. Freitas summarizes the dangers of such dissonance: "In our attempts to appear happy, to distract ourselves from our deeper, sometimes darker thoughts, we experience the opposite effect. In trying to always appear happy, we rob ourselves of joy."[39]

We are quick to condemn, slow to understand. And yet we expect (and maybe even demand) understanding and empathy from others in relation to our own selfies. Like Breanna, we may be unprepared to deal with the unintended consequences of our posts. Things we post in an effort to define who we are and where we are (in life) can become occasions for ridicule, defamation, and debate, which can launch us into deeper self-crises.

Listen to the music of the Grammy Award–winning band Twenty One Pilots. In their 2016 music video for "Stressed Out," the band rides through suburban Columbus, Ohio, on Big Wheels tricycles.[40] The toy tricycles have been blown up to adult size, making the men seem smaller, younger, more childlike. Singer and songwriter Tyler Joseph is dealing with the gap between what he was told and what he has experienced. Having been promised that when he got older, his fears would shrink, he's now even more insecure and aware of how he cares what other people think. This present reality creates a strong sense of nostalgia in Joseph, a desire to return to simpler days. These homeschooled kids stop at the boyhood

home of drummer Josh Dun. They retreat to his old bedroom. Joseph snaps back to days of make believe, when he dreamed of building a rocket ship to travel to outer space. But his dream is shattered by a harsh reality—namely, the need to "wake up" and "make money." The chorus boils down his dilemma to a tight couplet:

> Wish we could turn back time, to the good ol' days,
> When our momma sang us to sleep but now we're stressed out.[41]

Adults may be tempted to dismiss such longing for childhood as arrested development. Everyone would like to dodge the painful realities of rent or college loans. But this attitude pays short shrift to the psychic pain that adolescents are identifying with in the song. How can they get to adulthood when their current crises refuse to abate? Why are our adolescents so stressed out? Haven't we taken care of them, provided a roof over their head and shoes on their feet? We also handed them video games, iPads, and smartphones. What else could they possibly need? A user's manual explaining how to handle all those electronic prompts and pressures might have been helpful.

We have attached adolescents to devices with constant connection—an electronic leash—and then wondered why they feel like they are being tugged in too many directions. Social media insists we are born to perform, to command attention, to be celebrated by any means necessary. Such expectations can be exhausting and overwhelming. Profile management can feel like an endless and draining task. Our apps are always keeping score, tracking our progress. Social media can have echoes of *The Hunger Games*, watching our competitors flame out in real time. We may feel trapped and hemmed in.

Stressed-out teens may be comforted by the knowledge that the psalmist knows how they feel. The psalmist also experienced a sense of being hemmed in and surrounded on all sides.

> The cords of death entangled me;
> the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
> The cords of the grave coiled around me;
> the snares of death confronted me.

> In my distress I called to the LORD;
> I cried to my God for help. (Ps. 18:4–6)

This book seeks to honor that cry and attempts to look and listen carefully. What do our selfies communicate? Selfies can be silly or serious, casual or curated. They reflect our moods, our memories, our state of mind. They may be moments that we want to hold on to or replies that we expect will be thrown away. Snapchat makes our self-imaging disposable fun. Yet, throughout history, our most enduring self-portraits have arisen from thoughtful reflection and soul searching. They express our creativity and depth. Unlike our disappearing Snapchat self-images, the portraits of ourselves that endure are more comparable to the carefully curated images we post on Instagram. They express art and soul via our bodies. I hope this book will inspire us to create our best selfies yet.

In Luke 7, Jesus embarks on an itinerant healing ministry. He performs miracles in Capernaum and Nain, even raising a widow's son from the dead. As his fame spreads, Simon, a local religious leader, invites Jesus to dinner. Jesus responds to the gracious invitation by reclining in the Pharisee's home at his table (v. 36). As news of Simon's special guest spreads, an infamous woman crashes the dinner party. Her reputation may have resulted in a label like "slut." She stands away from the table, behind Jesus, weeping on his feet. To cry at someone's feet is quite a form of contrition. How much shame, pain, and confusion might have prompted her tears? Was she trying to summon words but couldn't figure out where to start? Perhaps she was trying to interrupt a party she hadn't been invited to. Maybe she even had some history with Simon, having already felt prejudged, condemned as beyond forgiveness. She wipes off her tears with her hair, kisses Jesus's feet, and then pours perfume from an alabaster jar upon them.

Simon takes what he knows of the woman as an occasion to also judge Jesus, saying, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Simon has already labeled the woman as condemned. Her reputation disqualifies her from a seat at the table, from any form of recognition. But Jesus turns her interruption into a teachable moment. He talks about loans and the divergent debts that two people accrued. There is so much discussion in the Bible about money. God is not a fan of usury or the rich getting richer on the backs of the poor. Jesus describes how one person

owes the loan officer ten times more than the other. There is a big gap between $250,000 of student debt and $25,000 in college loans. Jesus then asks who would be more grateful, more relieved, by the forgiveness of that debt. Simon rightly answers, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven" (v. 43). Jesus concurs and then turns Simon's question back upon him, "Do you see this woman?" (v. 44).

Simon thought that Jesus had failed to see the woman's moral failings. But Simon had failed to see the love and contrition communicated by the woman's tears. Jesus points out how inhospitable Simon had been compared to the woman. Simon did not offer water to clean Jesus's feet. Simon did not kiss or welcome him. Simon fell short as a host but still dared to stand in judgment of those excluded from his table. Yet the sinner acted with humility, grace, and considerable financial sacrifice in pouring out her perfume. Jesus says, "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven" (Luke 7:47). How fascinating that he acknowledges the *numerous* mistakes she's made. Jesus answers the question in Simon's heart saying, in essence, "I am a prophet. I know who is touching me and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner." But Jesus is also the kind of prophet who does something far more scandalous—he dines with and even forgives the ashamed.

This is the kind of patience and insight I want to practice with texting teens and harried parents. How can I judge them when I am so guilty of treating others impersonally, preferring to text instead of talk? How can I condemn others for self-centeredness while attempting to update my own status on Facebook? Let he who has never tweeted cast the first disparaging tweet! We all need to be forgiven for our lack of digital decorum. Condemnation is quick and easy; compassion takes time and patience. We need eyes to see and ears to hear.

Selfies is an extension of my initial foray into theology and technology, *iGods*.[42] While that book covered the largest companies and formats driving social media, *Selfies* aspires to get further into digital discipleship and stewardship. How do we love God and serve our neighbors through social media? Does the lure of the selfie shift our focus too narrowly upon ourselves? How can we deflect or at least accurately reflect the glory of God in each of us without glorifying ourselves? A key question resides in the ambitious construction of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9)—who or what is being elevated?

Shamir Fauntleroy

No gang signs, just degrees

Some churches have already reduced the implications of the gospel to individualistic salvation. In their 2005 book *Soul Searching*, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton introduced the term "moralistic therapeutic deism" to describe the core theological beliefs of the American adolescents they surveyed in their national study of youth and religion. Yet they did not place the blame on the teenagers for

thinking faith was all about rewards granted by God for good behavior. They challenged parents, teachers, and church leaders to present a far more robust gospel that moved adolescents beyond themselves toward service and community.[43]

Adults may have ample reasons to worry about the long-term effects of selfies. But rather than merely castigate youth, I will take a long look at both the history of art and the history of faith. *Selfies* will offer a reasoned, biblically informed response. It follows the theological method of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88).[44] His biblical reflections begin with the beautiful creation in Genesis, "the glory of the Lord." Balthasar's theology centers on God's most beautiful action, the ultimate form of the good: the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus, Balthasar posits, "we have a real and inescapable obligation to probe the possibilities of there being a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world and in spite of all the dangers inherent in such an undertaking—to probe the feasibility of a genuine encounter between divine revelation and antiquity."[45] We will look back in order to forge a way forward. Beautiful things (like God's creation—us) inspire beautiful actions (like photo-taking, art-making, and justice-seeking), which reflect beautiful thoughts about God and each other.

This book is about learning to see ourselves (and others) as God sees us. My methodology is rooted in reflection but is designed to inspire more active selfie making. Each chapter concludes with discussion questions that encourage us to take stock of our habits and challenges intended to expand our artistic range. Some may need to put down their phones and enjoy a much-needed rest. Others may end up snapping even more photos of themselves and their neighbors. We are living in an era of expansive possibilities for self-expression. I'm thrilled to highlight students and friends who are plunging ahead as thoughtful image makers.

A Survey of Selfies

This book will study the history of self-portraits in order to enliven our contemporary practices. We begin in antiquity and proceed into the twenty-first century of Snapchat filters and augmented reality. An appreciation and understanding of beauty will spark our consideration of ethics in a digital age. Each chapter follows a similar path. We will look at images,

question our actions, and turn to the Holy Trinity and the Bible for wisdom moving forward. As with life, we begin with general revelation, our senses, our reason, and our experience, and we judge them against our norming norm, the special revelation of Scripture. We will, I hope, develop (or recover) a more robust visual theology over the course of our study. I proceed in the inclusive spirit summarized by Dwight Hopkins: "Theological anthropology, drawing on one being created in God's image and heeding the call from Jesus, means a kind of democratic participation, promoting everyone's equal value and equal access to all the best created by human culture, fostering the ownership by working people of the wealth they created, men's and women's mutual sharing in the domestic and public spheres, and harmonious interweaving of ecological and human systems."[46] I am advocating for a biblical understanding of *shalom*, a peaceable kingdom that makes room for everyone to prosper. Eboni Marshall Turman notes how "it is in the uncomfortable dialogues that include all the voices, and in the transformative practices that employ all the bodies that the identity of Christ and the identity of Christ's body converges."[47] The giving and receiving of our selfies is a transformative practice involving our bodies that can become an occasion to celebrate the diversity of the body of Christ.

In *Selfies* we will explore core questions of identity—who we are as individuals, created in the image of God, and who we are as a people, challenged to love one another. Any discussion of selfies must consider the charge that a culture of narcissism has now birthed a new wave of narcissists. Today's teens didn't invent self-interest, but they have been saddled with the burden of profile management. In chapter 2 we travel back to the ancient world, to the source of the term, rereading the myth of Narcissus and considering how the Greeks' understanding of beauty might reflect how we view ourselves today. In chapter 3 we look at changes in technology that allowed Renaissance painters to rise in social status—the use of mirrors, for example, to master self-portraits and increase their fame (and fortune). In chapter 4 we examine how our finest writers have mined memory to forge an alternate future.

In chapter 5 we will discuss how to read a photograph and, more importantly, how to read a person. It is tough to place so much responsibility on a single image. How do we train ourselves to see through the images we're projecting via social media? Chapter 6 plunges into psychology. We

will endeavor to get behind the images we're projecting. What we want is to understand what our selfies say and what we're seeking. Chapter 7 is about where we are today. Why do we take selfies and where are our selfies headed? In chapter 8 we discuss the augmented reality we experience via Snapchat filters and apps like Meitu. Could our interest in playing with our appearance via Bitmojis and Animojis reflect a longing for the glory promised in the biblical book of Revelation? Could the transfiguration of Jesus provide a powerful preview of our future? We are created as selfies of God, but we are tempted to erect selfies as God. This is the tension we live within. Some may focus on how to make selfies for God; this book will focus on how to be selfies with God. We proceed with caution, in humility, and full of anticipation.

Questions to Consider/Discuss

Each chapter will conclude with questions to consider as discussion starters. This book could serve as the basis for a class or a small-group study.

1. What do you think about selfies? Do you find them distracting? Delightful? When have you seen a selfie violate a sacred space or moment?
2. What's the most dangerous selfie you've ever taken? Has something you've posted blown up bigger than you expected and ended up hurting more than you imagined? What was that like?
3. How do you view yourself? Do selfies bolster or undercut those feelings? What does God say and feel about you?

Selfie Challenge

Each chapter will also conclude with a selfie challenge—an opportunity to put these concepts into practice using the cameras on our phones. Sometimes we will strive to #knowthyselfie. At other times, we will endeavor to #lovethyneighborasthyselfie. This first selfie challenge is an opportunity to take a #selfiewithGod.

We send selfies to each other as a way to communicate our place and mood. You may be content, angry, enthused, or confused. Get started by taking a selfie to give God a status update on you. Try to communicate your feelings without a smile.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1909

Portrait of a Thin-Faced, Bearded Man