Neither To Exploit nor To Idolize:
The Role of Familial Embodied Love in the Encounter with Creation
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It is clear from mere observation that man has a rather confusing and disordered relationship to the natural world—ranging from pet obsession and nature worship on the one hand, to utter disregard and wasteful consumerism on the other. We witness it in the glaring contradiction between the outrage at the slaying of Cecil the lion and the silence on the Planned Parenthood trafficking of human body parts. We witness it in the clamor for organic, hormone-free meats from those who simultaneously insist that hormonal contraception is essential to a woman’s equality and happiness. We even witness it in some who rightly champion pro-life issues, but who may shrug off any responsibility whatsoever toward a sustainable use of the natural world. It seems clear that a tendency to objectify varying aspects of the world around him is endemic to the human person—and yet, why the extremes? Why do we not witness “equal opportunity objectification?” An adequate response to this question requires first a closer examination of the human inclination toward objectification.

The Theological Roots of Objectification

John Paul II’s theology of the body brilliantly illustrates the roots of this fallen tendency of mankind. Whether it be the objectification of human beings and relationships or an exploitation of the natural world, such inclinations stem from the same root: an obfuscation of man’s vision, which resulted from the particular nature of his original sin. In refusing to receive God’s gift of creation in the fullness (and in the manner) in which it was offered, man effectively refused to be a receiver before God. Rather than accept that God’s command regarding the forbidden fruit was motivated by love for His creatures, man instead viewed his Creator as jealously withholding something from him. John Paul comments, “By casting doubt in his heart on the deepest meaning of the gift...on love as the specific motive of creation...man turns his back on God-Love” and ushers in “what comes from the world.”

By seizing the fruit in spite of God’s warning, Adam and Eve transform before us into takers rather than receivers, who operate outside the dynamic of gift. They grasp at what they desire without any regard for the relationship that the initial gift of creation had established between themselves and God. In this process, however, they fail to recall an important fact: they themselves are a part of the very creation that they refuse to accept. Adopting such an attitude toward their Creator, Adam and Eve effectively refuse to receive even their very being as given from the hand of God. It is no accident, then, that as they refuse to receive themselves, they instinctively lose that full possession and understanding of themselves which they had initially experienced. They now fail to understand who they are, and a wedge of fear is driven between them as they hide their bodies from one another with leaves.

Much like the earth, which at this moment begins to resist man’s efforts to till it, woman emerges before man as an obstacle he must conquer rather than as a gift to be received and cared for. Through this first sin—this refusal to receive and hence to experience intimacy with the Divine Giver, man is no longer capable of perceiving the world as it truly is. This is so because it was only through his close relationship with the Creator in the first place that man was once able to perceive the world through God’s perspective; once severed from that relationship, man “loses his right to participate...in the divine vision of the world” and is only able to view the world and all in it in a darkened, limited, partial way. Without such Divine enlightenment, man’s clear understanding of himself and his companion as gifts to be received lovingly—and of the natural world as a gift entrusted to his care—is lost. From the earliest moments of mankind’s history, the seeds of what Pope Francis has called the “throwaway culture”—a viewpoint which perceives the created world as simply a material source of satisfaction from which to take, use and discard—were planted. Taking, objectifying, exploiting—however it is termed—is a tendency which runs deep in the human race.
But we must go deeper in order to respond to the question taken up at the beginning: if fallen man is convinced that his fulfillment will be achieved through exploitation and domination of the created world, then how does one explain the inconsistencies? What is behind that “championing” of the natural world—particularly the modern-day worship of animals as well as the environment—that seems to fly in the face of our fallen tendency to objectify all creation? And what is it that prevents some who might appropriately value human life but see no pressing need to care for the natural world?

**How Man Was Intended to Understand Himself**

Again, John Paul II’s theology of the body provides some wisdom here. As a matter of fact, before he examines the fall of man, John Paul famously examines him in those brief moments before sin to gain insight into what man was intended to be “from the beginning.” What he concludes from Adam’s interaction with his Creator in the Yahwist account of Genesis is that man, from his earliest moments, is seeking to understand himself and to find affirmation of that identity. Man in Genesis is seeking to know who he is and for what purpose he has been made—and we witness him come to such a discovery in a very particular way.

Initially, he comes to sense his superiority, his likeness with God, in fact, as he is presented with the animals. Though possessing a physical dimension bearing some similarity to the animals, Adam immediately realizes that he has more in common with his Creator than with his fellow created beings. It is he alone who converses with his Creator, he alone who exists in a state of intimacy with God—a condition in which no other being in the physical world is capable of abiding because it is a spiritual connection—an invisible dimension no animal shares with him.

In observing and naming them, then, Adam comes to a partial knowledge of himself, but primarily a knowledge after the fashion of a via negativa. He realizes what he is not—the animals are not a truly fitting companion for him because he cannot identify with them—they lack that interior element which would make such an identification possible. For a deeper, more complete self-knowledge, Adam must wait until the woman is presented to him by God. Upon seeing her, he famously exclaims “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Gen 2:23). For the first time in creation, we witness an expression of joy. But what John Paul emphasizes here is that, at this moment of beholding the woman for the first time, Adam is not merely fixated on the beauty revealed through her sexual difference. We are not to paraphrase him saying, “Wow, look at you!” Rather, in recognizing their common humanity, John Paul tells us that the first man “simply affirms the human identity of both.” It is almost as if Adam says “Wow! Look at me!”--“that’s who I am” and his self-knowledge is perfected through her. It is precisely in encountering another, notably different from, yet in a more profound way “like,” himself that Adam more fully knows himself. In searching for an affirmation of who he is, he sees her and instinctively identifies with her. And he rejoices. The deepest human happiness and the fullest kind of self-knowledge come through community.

Though she is not a replica of the man, the woman’s physical similarity to him is what at once reveals to him that invisible dimension which sets them both apart from the animals. The human body—directly encountering another human body—is essential to the process of affirming one’s own identity. (Even a similar bodily encounter with the animals was essential in Adam’s journey—only in that instance, it was his bodily dissimilarity from theirs which was revelatory for him.) Furthermore, John Paul notes that it is not the man alone who is affirmed in this bodily encounter with the woman. The joyful acclamation with which Adam greets Eve is as much an affirmation of her own identity as it is of his. His words are a sign that Adam is welcoming her—receiving her as a gift from the Creator—and such an acceptance communicates to her that she is a gift—that being a gift is an essential dimension of her identity. John Paul explains that she “discovers herself” thanks to the fact that she has been accepted and welcomed...and thanks to the way in which she has been received by the man.”

Such is a fundamental principle of human relationships: when a person is physically welcomed, when he is accepted by another in his fullness as a gift, only then does that person begin to understand, to know himself to be a gift; only then does he begin to grasp the fullness of his identity. Renowned retreat master Fr. Jacques Phillipe echoes this principle when he writes: “We urgently need the mediation of
another’s eyes to love ourselves and accept ourselves…we need to be looked upon by someone who says, as God did through the prophet Isaiah, ‘You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.’

Such is the pattern of our existence from its very beginning. In the creator’s design, new persons do not emerge from a cabbage patch, or a medical lab. From the first moment of human existence, it was the Creator’s design that each of us be surrounded by a family, an intimate, embodied community of persons—and our self-image is meant to develop and flourish in this context of a very concrete and visible love. Such is the necessary environment in which we learn the “gift character” of ourselves, and ultimately, of all created reality.

**Threats to Family Intimacy**

While obvious threats to such an affirming familial dynamic are posed by practices such as fornication, co-habitation, divorce, and contraception, each of which fails to provide the context for receiving a person as a spiritual, physical whole, and which further risks depriving any possible children of a stable, identity-affirming environment, there exist more subtle current trends which do harm to such an environment as well, one prime example being our culture’s movement toward disembodied social communication through technology. We must understand as a threat all those things which divorce a person from true, embodied relating with those who are placed in his most intimate circle of contact. A lack of presence in our closest relationships—those which are designed by the Creator to welcome and affirm our being—is leaving many crippled in their self-understanding, and wounded in their identities.

The body, by its nature as a physical symbol, is what makes us present to the world (“the body reveals man”). The body is what makes a person “concrete,” tangible, approachable by those around him. When we are met with the possibility of relating to others through our various communication devices rather than through our bodies, however, a strange paradox seems to occur: we begin to become insensitive to those in our bodily presence. Our phones and other devices, though offering possibilities for contact once unimaginable, are cutting us off from those physically in our midst. Spouses, children, siblings—those in our most intimate circle of daily contact—those most closely connected to the formation of one another’s self-image—are being ignored in favor of matters or persons essentially abstract from us.

Opportunities to converse or to offer a sympathetic ear are being lost. Even the unique joy of experiencing a movie together as a family is being lost when each person in the family is allowed to watch his own choice of movie on his own device (no one need compromise anymore!). My own children are always disappointed if we sit down as a family to watch a movie and my husband or I sneak away to try to cross some chore off our list. Their very disappointment reveals that children value the presence of their parents—parents sometimes undervalue the power of that presence—and feel that they are wasting time if they are not “accomplishing” something. It is precisely such a mindset which has convinced so many over the last several decades that daycare and early schooling are somehow preferable environments for young children to being home with a parent. For as long as some “professional” is tending to a child’s daily needs, it somehow makes no difference who is doing the tending.

This is a dangerous attitude that prevails in our culture—and flies in the face of the truth that our children come to know and value themselves in the loving presence of those who mean the most to them—their parents and siblings. Sometimes we just need to “be,” to be available so that they can approach us face-to-face with their thoughts or needs and not always feel in competition with our work or our activities on our computers or phones. In a fruitful family life, true “quality time” is in many cases identical to “quantity time.” Making time for such undivided attention may be experienced as a “waste” to a busy adult, but is in fact critical to a child’s development; it is a physical sign that one is truly receiving and appreciating him. Our body, because of its material nature, is limited; we can only be looking at one person at a time. And so we must carefully consider how we spend our time engaged with persons or things removed from our presence—and what it might cost those around us.

In addition to making a person present to others, the experience of the human body, since the first sin, has been inseparably related to the experience of shame. From the beginning, we see that shame was a unique physical experience, but one which indicated that something had gone spiritually awry. The
human body was not the source of that first sin; the source of sin was man’s spirit, in the way he misused his freedom to indulge his desires at whatever cost.

But the body was, and continues to be, the place where shame is experienced. The body is the location of shame. And shame always arises when sin arises—whether it is one’s own sin, or whether one is in danger of becoming victim to someone else’s sin. It is a protective indicator—manifested through a physical response: a covering-up, a blush, a failure to meet another’s gaze. It is precisely in the community of other bodies that we are most aware when someone crosses a line. Recall, we come to know ourselves in community, right or wrong.

When our communication with others begins to lose its bodily element, the first thing that disappears is shame. When encounter with the human body is not central to our relationship with someone, the warnings and signals that shame sends out go unnoticed. Why are people texting things and posting things online that they would never have thought to do in someone else’s physical presence? Because they were not in someone else’s physical presence. When we fail to encounter a living body, we fail to grasp the depth of the whole person, and it becomes that much easier to think of fellow persons as objects.

Embodied Encounter Extended Beyond Family

The critical importance of live, physical encounter in human development extends to the way in which we relate to the entire created world. For decades, advocates of Montessori methods of education have called for children to be immersed in concrete experiences of material reality before being introduced to fantasy stories or abstractions of any sort. Exploring nature, interacting with natural materials rather than synthetics or plastics, and attempting practical life activities (often reserved in our culture for adults) are all attempts to ground a child in reality, to help him to understand and conform himself to the reality of the world as the basis for his own eventual creative endeavors.

Wendell Berry, among others, has echoed this point about such encounter when he notes that the average American meal, containing “anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed…and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived” has placed us in “exile from biological reality.”

Just as we cannot come into the fullness of our identity without physical encounter with other humans, we cannot come to properly value the created world if we lose our direct, embodied contact with nature. We become that much more removed from reality, and find it that much easier to simply objectify the natural world without reference to what might be demanded by true stewardship.

The very fact that Americans spend over $20 billion dollars annually on video games is a testament to this experience of distance from the natural world; for just as such disembodied activity contributes to a lack of human communal interaction as described above, it simultaneously prevents that necessary embodied encounter with nature. Even the latest generation of video games—which boast about incorporating physical activity (such as Wii and PlayStation)—are played *indoors in front of a screen*—creating a generation of young people experiencing a distance from nature which has been termed by one author as “Nature Deficit Disorder.”

Without such direct contact with the natural world—even through such simple activities as gardening, hiking, or fishing—the human being is prevented from encountering the beauty and power of nature—and misses the opportunity to be moved and humbled before it. It is primarily through such embodied encounter with the natural world that man comes to know that his role as its steward is not absolute, but rather one which must conform itself to and work within its Divine design to preserve and protect it for future generations.

Correlation Between Family-Established Identity and Properly Relating to the Natural World

The parallel dynamics of man encountering man, and man encountering the natural world, are not simply parallel—there exists a direct correlation between the two: if we do not find our identities affirmed through loving familial encounter, if we are deprived of the attentive presence and total acceptance of those placed nearest to us—we can become a mystery to ourselves. When the fact that we are a gift, of infinite worth and deserving of love, is not communicated to us, we can misunderstand the fullness of our very identity and think of ourselves after the fashion of a mere object, turning to the *material world* as a
potential source of satisfaction for that unmet spiritual need. Here is where we find the paradoxically co-existing modern trends of either worshipping or exploiting the natural world.

On the one hand, our culture is brimming with persons so hungry for affirmation that they exalt the so-called “unconditional love” of their pets over those human relationships which have left them wounded; and on the other, we witness a ravenous consumerism unknown to history in the name of personal fulfillment. Each extreme attempts to fulfill an interior longing for affirmation and identification with a purely material solution. We must recall that what originally led Adam to self-understanding was a receptive encounter with another human person—a physical being who at the same time transcended the natural world with her interior dimension. When we live unattuned to such a unique dimension, however, we unwittingly reduce ourselves to our material dimension alone. Such a reduction, however, tends to be experienced not as a reduction, but instead as an elevating of the dignity of animals and the natural world in general. (Pets are now a $60 billion industry in the US alone.\textsuperscript{11}) On the opposite extreme lie those who seek to fulfill their sense of longing by placing bodily comfort and indulgence above all, without regard to the effect of such a prioritization upon the world around them.

It is imperative that any effort toward articulating a “human ecology” take into account the original manner in which the first human persons came to know themselves. Though subsequently marred by a tendency toward objectification, man nonetheless is still called to be creation’s steward—a role that will be difficult to fulfill authentically without the identity-affirming experience of loving familial presence from the first moments of his existence. Without embodied encounter at the most intimate level, he will struggle to respond properly at a global level.

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\item John Paul II, 27:4.
\item John Paul II, 14:4.
\item John Paul II, 17:5.
\item John Paul II, 9:4.
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