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The SOUL *of* DESIRE

DISCOVERING *the* NEUROSCIENCE *of*
LONGING, BEAUTY, *and* COMMUNITY



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DESIRE

A People of Longing

“WHAT DO YOU WANT?” I ASKED.

A blank stare, just short of quizzical, was the response I got. This was not the question Aaron had anticipated. His was a troubled life, and he thought he had made those troubles plain to me. He thought he knew what his problems were. He was practiced in naming them. He could identify what he perceived to be wrong with his life.

But now words failed him. As he later told me, he could not recall the last time—let alone the first time—anyone had asked him that question apart from ordering in a restaurant. All he could think of—but wasn’t able to say at the time—was that he wanted to be relieved of the symptoms that were swallowing his life.

Aaron had not considered that his desire—what he wanted, what he longed for—was central to his experience of depression and intermittent panic. Once he gathered himself, he answered, “I don’t know what I want.”

It was not difficult for me to see what he meant. Several months earlier Aaron had ended an affair that had nearly devoured his marriage. The work he was doing with his wife to repair the cavernous rupture remained tenuous, and he still struggled to refrain from entertaining fantasies of his experience with the other woman.

What Aaron “wanted,” in his view, was the collection of sensations, images, feelings, thoughts, and actions he had immersed himself in over the course of the affair—a state of mind to which he turned his attention

whenever he needed relief from anxiety (the equivalent of an addiction). Consequently, to name what he “really” wanted was to evoke great conflict: the comfort and relief offered by images of the affair juxtaposed with feelings of guilt, shame, and despair when he thought about the effort involved in renewing his marriage. Desire mocked him, his mind seemingly lashed to something outside the boundaries of his covenant with God, his wife, and his community.

It never occurred to him that behind his choices lay his most primal desires—indeed, his most holy longings. In fact, these desires were contributing antecedently to everything he judged dysfunctional and shameful about his life.¹ Little did he know that desire was far more than just the source of his affliction (as he presumed); it was in fact the very element that could lead him to a life of beauty, goodness, and joy.



We are people of desire. We want things. We long for things. It is primal to our nature to yearn. As Saint Augustine reflected, “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing. . . . That is our life, to be trained by longing.”² We have been at it as a race for as long as we have been on the planet.³

We begin at birth with our embodied desires for breath, nourishment, warmth, and physical security. These are linked to an emotional desire for nurture that begins in childhood, extends through adulthood, and is mediated both interpersonally and neurobiologically—that is, it is felt, sensed, and acted on in our relationships with others and within our own brains. These early longings form the hard deck upon which others stand as a child matures. It doesn’t take much to see the breadth of our desire (we modernists want a *lot*, both significant and trivial) or the depth of our desire—although the true nature of this is often outside our conscious understanding.

We are told by many wise guides that this desire begins and ends with God—God’s desire for us to desire unity with him. The idea is not for us to be dissolved into God (losing ourselves) but to be unified with him so that

the more connected we are to him, the more we become distinctly ourselves. Christian anthropology reveals, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, that the depth and intensity of our desire for and unity with God directly and proportionately mirror the degree to which we become the truest versions of our individual selves. And our Scriptures bear this out. Along with expressions of praise and gratitude (which occupy their own place of prominence), we read a vast number of stories of people who desire help from God—who long for guidance, wisdom, and courage. We are a wanting people. Even the prayer Jesus gave his disciples, the Lord's Prayer, is filled with requests. Beyond hallowing the Father's name, all else is an expression of what we want as an extension of what we most deeply need.

James K. A. Smith has shed important light on this, reminding us of the biblical framework within which to approach the nature of desire. Within that frame, he persuasively and constructively explores the anthropological, philosophical, and theological underpinnings of the nature and role of desire in our status as image bearers of God.⁴ Smith, much in the spirit of Augustine, invites his readers to contend with the reality that desire is innate, and simultaneously, it is invariably formed.⁵ Desire does not exist merely as some independent phenomenon to which we respond; it is also something that, like any good gardener knows, must be pruned. It must be shaped and will be shaped by whatever practices, habits, or (in Smith's language) liturgies we develop—liturgies we practice whether we know it or not.

Smith lays a foundation that I would have readers of this book presume as well: that a biblical understanding of what it means to be human centrally locates desire in love—to use Smith's words, we are what we love.⁶ Moreover, we are desiring creatures; we are created, not self-made, and we are made with the intention to love—to desire.

Furthermore, our behavior is far more powerfully driven by the habits we form in our embodied movements than by what we “think.”⁷ Before we are thinking creatures, we are desiring and then habit-forming creatures. This is not to suggest that we are *only* desiring creatures and that rational processing is somehow a subordinate function of our minds or

that we are not formed by our thoughts—far from it. If I cannot reason about the order of actions needed to change a flat tire on my car, it doesn't matter how much I desire for it to change. However, it is my desire to drive the car on four air-filled tires so that I can meet my wife at the airport that engages my “thinking” brain to change the tire in the first place. Eventually, we will see how this biblical approach to desire is reflected in the interpersonal neurobiological features that make us human. We will also examine how the work we do in vulnerable community creates space in which to participate in the work of the Spirit, who awakens us and shapes our desires as we practice for heaven—as we form habits, or liturgies, of relational creativity.

All well and good, then, is desire. But I have to admit, this whole notion of desiring God more than anything else can be tricky for me. If my desire begins with God's loving desire for me and ends with finding its consummation in God, the road in between seems anything but straightforward or easy. This despite my awareness that as a follower of Jesus, only God am I made to love—to desire—with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 12:30). Frankly, it's easy for me to desire just about anything that is pleasurable, good, or beautiful far more than I desire God. I mean, everything else is right in front of me. I can touch it or feel it—or at least construct it in the recesses of my mind's imagined, disembodied self.

If it's really true that, as Augustine wrote, my heart remains restless until it finds its rest in God,⁸ then why, oh why do other things compete so readily for my heart's attention? Why do I long so deeply for the idealized woman or work or status? Why do I yearn so hungrily for food or financial security or simply the absence of suffering or emotional pain? I am reminded of Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, in which we hear the words of Dr. Tom More: “I believe in God and the whole business,” More admits, “but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all.”⁹

Still, my difficulty in directing my desire, my love, toward God is not completely mysterious. As René Girard points out, no small part of why

I desire something is envy. Human behavior that is intentional is primarily learned through mimicry, by watching the intentional behavior of others. Our desires are no different, as they are expressions of our intention. Therefore, I want something because you want it. And if you're a person of authority in my world, one whose admiration and affection I long for, I will tend to want the things you want.¹⁰ As a result, a great deal of what and how I desire has less to do with the object of my desire and more to do with being able to compete in my world, with being adequate and acceptable. Indeed, my desire is not so much about an object as it is about the condition of my relationality, with whom and how I am living relationally. Thus, when I "hunger and thirst [desire] for righteousness [right relationality]," I will be filled (Matthew 5:6). Not after I "acquire" an object—even if that object is a relationship. And as I have explored in *The Soul of Shame*,¹¹ my need to have what you have is itself a way for me to defend against my shame of not being enough, shame that finds its way into my life and my soul early and often.¹²

It is helpful to know that much of my desire is related to envy. What I really long for, it turns out, is for God to show up and compete (if indeed I am created to long for him like I long for nothing else as an expression of being loved by and loving him). I want him to appear in an embodied way in my life now (not just two thousand or so years ago) and give me a genuine experience that will persuade me to want him more than anything else. I want him to draw me to himself in some imagined loving, irresistible way such that I won't simply *want* to want him but will actually want relationship with him more than anything else. More than arousal or sex. More than power. More than wealth. More than knowing all the things I want to know so that I won't have to worry about making mistakes and disappointing people who will leave me as a result. I plead in anguish with God, as does John Donne, to "Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me."¹³

Perhaps I don't desire God like I desire those other things because no one else possesses him like they possess anything else either. To desire

God, it turns out, would have to entail shame being so far outside my life that it wouldn't interfere with my wanting him. But shame is in my life, so evil can use it to leverage my desire for things I can see with my own eyes, things other people have that I don't.

If I asked you the same question I asked my patient Aaron—"What do you want?"—and you could for a moment put aside the predictable anxiety that comes with it, I'm confident that at some point in your reflection you would move beyond the banal and become aware that what calls to you from the depths of your soul, what you most achingly long for, is that which is beautiful, good, true, and joyful. It is not difficult to identify beauty, goodness, and truth found in objects or experiences outside ourselves (e.g., the Grand Tetons, Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 5, *The Shawshank Redemption*). But we ultimately long to discover and become these things in the context of embodied relationships. Our hearts, minds, and souls most desperately want to love and be loved by real people in real time and space, not the fantasized, virtual people who make up the vast majority of our mental narratives. You know the ones—the imagined stories we tell much of every waking hour that either demonize or idealize our friend or enemy, our spouse or child, as well as the story we tell about ourselves that is laden with shame and so distorts our perspective, making it difficult to receive in an equally integrated way the wild, deep love of God. We want all of that in an embodied fashion. Real. It needs to have color and sound and a pulse. If we can't feel it in our bones and blood, there's little use pursuing it any further.

The evidence of our longing is writ large in our culture, from U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" to Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* to Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* to the words of the New Testament, where we read that "the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. . . . Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:19-23). It is not just we humans who long for things. We do so in concert with the entire material world.

What's more, we don't desire just anything. We aren't interested in the dull or painful. We don't eagerly anticipate the adequate. We don't long to get the flu. We don't hope to be more ashamed by the end of the day. No. We long for a world of goodness and beauty, of biblical justice, of putting all things right. We long for a world in which our relationships with those of the other gender, ethnic people group, and political party, as well as with the material world, are governed by kindness and honesty. Our artifacts and our relationships repeatedly remind us that desire is active, whether it be out in the open, swimming just below the surface of our consciousness, or submerged fathoms below. And, as with Aaron, it is also something to which we pay little proper attention.

Speaking of relationships, we want them to be robust and soaked with kindness. We long for—whether we know it or not—deep connection with friends or the one we want to marry or the one we are married to and have sex with and make a life with. We want to engage in work we find meaningful and that requires the sort of effort that lets us know we have left a part of ourselves in it while expanding our sense of ourselves in the process. We want to partake in creating artifacts—whether they be legal briefs or hikes in Glacier National Park or furniture or music or middle school graduates—that are marked by, literally and nothing less than, beauty.

We want to enjoy our embodied presence on the earth. Who actually wants to be unfit? Who wants heart disease, diabetes, cancer, knee replacements, obesity, or any of the other medical and psychiatric maladies that plague us? We want our bodies to reflect the same goodness and beauty that we long for in any other domain of our lives. We hunger and thirst for a physical engagement with our world that leaves us unworried about the mud God's breath suffuses (Genesis 2:7).

We regularly long for an adventure in nature or human creativity that leaves us speechless, where we know by its depth of profundity that we can't clutch it, despite our inclination to do so. Who doesn't want to be there when the sun rises on El Capitan in Yosemite Valley or can tear their eyes away from van Gogh's *Starry Night*? We want springs, summers, autumns,

and winters that live into their fullness, and we want to be resilient enough to abide in them with gratitude and wonder, faithfully cultivating the land and tending the creation in such a way that we live to see the climate changing—moving, eventually, in a different direction.

We want the joy of others’—not least God’s—utter delight at being in our presence. We long to encounter and be encountered by others without exploitation on anyone’s part. Even when it comes to death, as much as it is not the way it is supposed to be, we long to die well. When we are not distracted by our fickle and feckless nature, we can name any number of things we want at the center of our souls—things we know require time, energy, and committed relationships to create, things that reflect, when we truly see it, the world “charged with the grandeur of God.”¹⁴ In a portion of John O’Donohue’s “For Longing” the poet expresses much of what echoes in our hearts:

Blessed be the longing that brought you here
And quickens your soul with wonder. . . .

May you come to accept your longing as divine
urgency.

May you know the urgency with which God longs
for you.¹⁵

Again—we have been created as people of desire, in the image of the triune Desirer.

DESIRE AND SEX—A BRIEF NOTE

Unsurprisingly, whenever we bring the topic of desire into view, our imaginations easily wander in the direction of sex, which can be as discomforting as it is arousing—but it is certainly not irrelevant. Visual and musical artists rightly draw our attention and give expression to this part of our lives not only because of the energy surrounding it but also because of the role it plays physically and emotionally, representing some of the most vulnerable and creative features of our human experience.

And no wonder, given the placeholder sexuality is for the intersection of our desire for beauty and goodness.

But I want to invite you to consider that the beauty, energy, and vulnerability bound up and often expressed in our sexuality often points to something that is deeper and beyond sex itself. It is easy for our imaginations—and hence the rest of our lives—to atrophy (and so they have) if the ultimate endpoint of all desire is orgasm. Because as we know, once it's over, it's over. But we don't want it to be over. We want something more—something eternal. Hence true desire encompasses much more than sex and sexuality.

THE “PROBLEM” OF DESIRE

Let us not assume that human desire is a neutral phenomenon or is always directed toward goodness and beauty—quite the contrary. There is not space here to properly explore a theology of desire; rather, we are focusing on its interpersonal neurobiological features. But to speak of desire necessarily invokes theological and anthropological implications that are worthy of acknowledgment. Indeed, it is my intention for theology and anthropology to set the conditions for our exploration of interpersonal neurobiology, not the other way around. Plausibility structures matter and are in play whether we're aware of them or not.¹⁶ The church fathers consistently acknowledged the beauty and goodness of desire (e.g., Augustine, above), but they were not naive to the potential for desire to be bent by sin. They knew that our longing for an ever-growing relationship with God—one that leads to loving others, ourselves, and the world deeply—could easily be turned to desiring objects for their own sake. Instead of experiencing joy in relationship with God and others, we desire to become God and to possess others and the objects they love.

Moreover, when I cannot have what I desire, I often respond with envy. Again, as Girard has pointed out, although the Tenth Commandment is the last, in many ways it is the source of why I so easily break the first nine.¹⁷ Theologically, then, desire, like all human behavior, is subject to

what we call sin and therefore at all times must be held up to the light of the work of the Spirit.¹⁸ I easily attest that in my own life there is nothing I do that is not tainted with mixed motives, laced with some latent urge to own, clutch, consume, or become master of the universe. To be God. Only not God like God is but like the devil would be if he were in charge.

So it's important to be aware of that thread of our desire that seeks not beauty or goodness but rather their devouring. This again is what Girard emphasizes in his work; we must be aware that desire, on shame's terms, is primarily about envy.¹⁹ And envy's source is shame. This is why so much of our desire is channeled in ways that are, to use the language of interpersonal neurobiology, disintegrating. This was what led to Aaron's affair.

But herein lies the goodness and beauty of the gospel. God's desire for us to live in communion with him and steward the earth was so deep that it seemingly outweighed his awareness of what we would do to him and each other after he created us in the first place. It is God's desire for us, his love for us, that leads him to call to our desire, imperfect as our responses may be. He is well aware that I am still quite capable of desiring things in a way that leads only to harm. We read in Genesis 3 that the woman's desire would be for her husband, in Genesis 4 that sin was crouching at Cain's door and its desire was for him. When desire is bent by our sense that the world is one of scarcity, it devolves into devouring.

No one is more aware of the depth of our sin, nor takes more seriously our penchant for devouring, than Jesus. At the same time, he is not worried about it, nor does it prevent him from doing the work of the Father in redeeming and then using our desire to enable us to practice for God's heaven that is surely coming. It is desire—ultimately our desire for him—that God has placed in the very center of our being and that he is counting on to energize our relationship with him and others.

DESIRE AND DEVELOPMENT

Desire is something no child has to be taught. Early in the developmental process, most of a child's desires center around physical needs being met or objects that attract interest. If a child is securely attached to her

parents, she will readily and without guile ask for or tell them what she wants, either with nonverbal cues or words. The general posture of children is to name what they want: unvarnished, uncalculated, and unambiguous. Their repertoire expands as their parents (hopefully) guide and direct the energy behind it. In general, securely attached children don't worry about managing others' emotional needs when naming what they want. They don't feel compelled to parent their parents or their siblings. Moreover, good parenting involves acknowledging and validating a child's desires even while setting limits on them.

Desire is part of what it means to be a child, as implied in Jesus' words to his disciples when he tells them, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). If we aren't careful, we can too easily assume that all children want is for their own personal needs to be met; we interpret this energy of desire in a theological framework that categorizes it as sinful or not depending on how unpleasant it makes us adults feel.

But research in the field of attachment sheds important light on this dynamic. Children use their caregivers as a secure base from which to explore their inner and outer worlds with ever-increasing degrees of confidence and proper risk taking.²⁰ They move from desiring milk from their mother's breast to desiring the toy on the other side of the room, from playing guitar to attaining a driver's license, from talking to the dark-haired girl in English class to joining the Marines. This desire never ends, but if we have not learned as children how to live into it, we will have to, as adults, become like children to learn about it properly for the first time—as Jesus himself indicates.

A great deal of parenting energy is devoted to channeling and shaping a child's desire in such a way that the child learns at least two important realities about the world. First, he learns that his desire is important. His parents attune not only to what he wants but *that* he wants, and they support the child's experience of asking for things. In this way, a child is formed into someone whose inner emotional state expressed in longing finds a receptive audience, strengthening his capacity to live

transparently in the world. The child hears from his parents that they are glad to receive his desire as part of their joyful welcome of him, over and over, into the world.²¹

But second, and equally important, the child learns that his desires may not always be met—he may not get what he wants when and how he wants it. This necessary “no” in the face of the child’s ever-expanding desire is as important as any “yes.” At the same time, proper mentalizing (the awareness that one has a mind, that it enables navigation of the world, and that this is true for others as well, allowing us to imagine what is transpiring in another person’s mind) on the part of the parent enables the child to sense that his desire itself is welcomed, even if the object of his desire is outside the boundary of what is good for him at the time.²²

Let me assure you, this is not easy for a parent (or teacher, coach, employer, spouse, or friend) to pull off. At any given moment in which I set a limit for my child, I cannot predict that her reaction will be what I want it to be: swift compliance. Often there is, as any parent knows, resistance on the part of the child that I don’t like, which requires even more work on my part. In essence, my child is now limiting what I want, which is for her to stop bothering me with what she wants! It is in this moment that desire is tested and matured—both hers and mine. As the parent, I must find a way to, as best I can, say “no” to the object of my daughter’s desire while saying “yes” to her desire itself. This is eerily similar to what was happening in the Garden of Eden in that long-ago time. Our first parents clearly had trouble living within the limits. But more on that later.

In these moments in which “no” is properly limiting “yes,” our interpersonal neurobiological experience of desire is being refined and deepened. These early exchanges in the development of secure attachment form us into people who will eventually know that desire in and of itself is to be honored and named. And we learn this not only as an abstract fact but also as an embodied reality. When this happens, we enter into a way of being with each other that is consistent with how our interpersonal neurobiological systems are intended to work.

Along this path something deeper and weightier arrives, emerging into our consciousness one neural network at a time. Amid all the targets of our longing that we've named, at some point we awaken to our desire to be known. The biblical narrative bears witness to the reality of this unquenchable desire, from the slave Hagar, who tells the Lord, "You are the God who sees me" (Genesis 16:13), to the prophet Jeremiah, of whom God says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5), to the apostle Paul, who states that believers "know God—or rather are known by God" (Galatians 4:9). We long to be seen, heard, and felt by one whom we sense desires to see us, hear us, and feel what we feel.

Every baby comes into the world looking for someone who is looking for him or her. To have a conscious, embodied awareness of being known by God is a necessary feature of the life of loving God, and our awareness of being known by God is measured by the degree to which we are known by each other. This type of hunger abides with us forever, echoing the author of Ecclesiastes when he writes that God has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). When regarding the notion of eternity, we are not merely aware of time and its passage, nor do we simply long to live forever. Rather, we long to be known forever, ever more deeply and joyfully, for the purposes that we will explore in this book. In the center of our souls, "eternity" is not just measured in time; it is measured in depth—a depth that feels infinite. And in this case, it is the depth of our desire to be known that is infinite.

No longing is deeper. As Jeremiah 1:5 suggests, the process of being known is a fundamental feature of what it means to be human long before we reach physical form, let alone consciousness. But it is something we are born to grow into, and it is a process that requires our interaction with and pursuit by others. We are formed by being known by others, which enables us to know. Moreover, regardless of our level of awareness of it, we long to be so consummately known that we carry the reality of it with us in our interpersonal neurobiological experience wherever we go and in whatever endeavor we find ourselves. We long for that state of confident expectancy with every footfall that lands on life's pavement.

Granted, most of the time we have little to no idea that this is going on in our minds. During much of our life we are consciously aware only of what we are immediately sensing—what we want but don't have. We don't at some random age suddenly say, "Oh my gosh, I so want to be known by God and others." Instead we travel a subtler path, one that begins, hopefully, in the context of secure attachment to our parents. Each of us experiences our own particular awakening to this desire—or not, depending on the security of our emotional attachment. If we are unaware of it, deny it, actively resist it, or misdirect it, our lives tend to be more afflicted.

I want to be known by my parents and siblings, then by my friends and teachers and coaches, then by the one in whom I have a romantic interest or by my spiritual guides. The desire to be known in these contexts emerges for the most part as tacit, nonconscious interpersonal neurobiological events. But it is fair to say that in every one of these relational instances, the fire of God's Spirit is burning in a way that reflects what the biblical story contends is, ultimately, our desire for God and our desire to be desired by him—albeit without shame as part of the conversation.

Embedded in the process of being known is our awareness that the one by whom we are known desires to know us. As such, a critical element of our desire is that of being desired. We long to be infinitely desired, wanted by the other yet—and crucially—without being consumed by the other. Without being exploited. Without being ignored or imprisoned. This begins at birth and winds its way through all of our relationships at every level of intimacy. It is desire that enables us to differentiate from our parents and siblings and that draws us to connect with other differentiated beings. No matter how superficial or deep, this seminal drive for connection is preeminent. Wisdom suggests that in fact the more deeply connected to God we are, the more able each of us is to realize our unique individuality. That we seem to have a fathomless depth of wanting suggests that our longing indeed will be fulfilled only in a relationship of comparable, infinite depth.

DESIRE AND THE MIND

In the world of interpersonal neurobiology (or IPNB), we speak of emotion as the neurobiochemical and interpersonal energy around which the brain organizes itself.²³ Using the metaphor of an automobile, it is the gasoline in the tank (or, for you hybrid owners, the electric charge in the battery). This does not mean it is the most important activity of the mind, but there is nothing we do that does not in some way require the regulation of emotion.²⁴ Hence, when we speak of “desire,” we are not reducing it to “feelings,” but emotion will be an integral part of whatever it is. We use words to symbolize collective clusters of human experience. This is how we use the word “desire,” but we are not able to identify or measure it as a singular homogenous “thing” in the material world. I don’t have a localized set of “desire” neurons in my brain, despite the fact that parts of the brain are activated during experiences of pleasure or arousal or anticipation.²⁵

When we experience all of the sensations, images, feelings, thoughts, and behavioral impulses that we equate with the notion of desire, there is a primary emotional element to our experience that provides the basis for what we’re talking about. However, it would be more helpful to speak of desire as our experience of this entire collective convergence of what we sense, image, feel, think, and are primed to do behaviorally that amounts to “what we want.”

“What we want,” then, is a complex constellation of experiences, sensations, and impulses, all of which we are continually trying to make sense. This process of “making sense of what we sense” is fundamental to how we humans, unique among living creatures, develop into storytellers. As we have seen from attachment research, the stories we tell are contingent on the type of attachment we form with our primary caregivers.²⁶ It is here, then, in the attachment laboratories of our families that we learn to tell our story of desire. Not only that we desire but that we are a delight because we do. Our ability to name what we want in our developmental years enables us to seamlessly enter into praying the Psalms in all of their naked honesty, leaving no stone of desire unturned,

whether it be for God's rescue, his blessing, or his smiting of our enemies. We Christians believe in a God who can take it (at least I want to believe that), and I live into that reality by naming what I want, even if I'm not going to get it.

Fine and good, you may be thinking. This thing called desire may be real. It may even be interesting. But what does it have to do with healing, let alone with redemption and the renewal of all things? Isn't desire what led to Aaron's (and so many others') trouble in the first place? Wasn't that Eve and Adam's problem, their desire? Best that we simply know what and where our desires are so that we can keep an eye on them. So that we can keep them from getting out of hand and leading us down paths we don't want to travel. What does desire have to do with solving the hard problems of the world? What does it have to do with mental illness, spiritual malignancy, climate change, sexual dilution or abuse, racism, immigration convulsions, or fear of economic collapse? If desire doesn't speak to those realities, why are we speaking about it at all? Further consideration of our topic may seem like wasted time. The real world, the one that matters, the one with real problems, is waiting for real answers. It is not waiting for one more distraction in the direction of desire.

Perhaps. But it turns out that our brains and our relationships won't stand for that conclusion. As we will see, everything we imagine we must do to practice for heaven by creating beauty in the ash heaps of our world, be they marriages or toxic waste dumps, begins with desire. In this world of brokenness, that which is broken was not always so; it is merely the outgrowth of defiled desire. And for the world to be redeemed, God does not destroy desire; rather, he resurrects and renews it while using it to renew everything else, beginning with us.

In *The Soul of Shame* I explored the nature of shame and its place in our stories. In the wake of that project two things came immanently into view. First was the overwhelming profusion of shame as a dominant feature that evil uses to shape our lives, my own not the least. The echoes of others' resonance with that contention has and continues to be deafening. But second, and unexpectedly, is that the very reality of

shame—the pitch-black darkness of the vault in which we often feel trapped and suffocated—makes possible the blinding brightness of the light that fills a crack in the vault’s door.²⁷ Evil did not see that light coming in the early stages of its planned attempt to overthrow God that morning in Eden. It hijacked our desire—not least our primal desire for beauty, goodness, and joy (the traits of God that, among others, evoke our worship of him)—and exploited it in its attempt to devour the creation. But God renews our desire while using it to renew everything else, beginning with us. God’s utter, joyful desire is for us to be with him and he with us such that we might together create beauty in the world. God’s desire calls to ours and breathes life into the lungs of the world. Here we are confronted with a deep paradox: it is desire that evil exploited, inserting shame in its place, yet desire is the very substance of our created being to which God is calling. He is calling out our desire in order to redeem it and make it the leading edge of the renewal of all things.

Because our yearning is the fuel shame depends on to ignite and keep burning, followers of Jesus can far too prematurely dismiss desire as a source of danger. We think we must avoid desire at all cost in order to keep away from the pitfalls of sin and the shame that accompanies it. Paradoxically, it is in naming our desire for beauty that we align ourselves with the most primal call of God, which is being broadcast from the heights of heaven and is planted in the core of our souls. No wonder Jesus’ first words as recorded in the Gospel of John are “What do you want?” (John 1:38). God knows we are people of desire and longs for us to name our longings so that we can get on with the business of living together in his kingdom of beauty, goodness, and joy.

So when I asked Aaron, sitting in my office, what he wanted, my question at first caused confusion. He thought he was there to discuss his problems, which was not untrue. But for Aaron to realize healing and recommissioning into the fullness of life, he would eventually need to name what he wanted. As is true for so many others whose stories I have been privileged to hear, Aaron was unaware of his longings at their source of earliest emergence. Given how much of his narrative was

flooded with the pain and shame of his current circumstances, it was not easy for him to turn his attention to the first two decades of his life, let alone consider that they had much to offer that would relieve his agony and point the way to a regenerated life. Given that reality, we began where he was able to go.

As we took the first tentative steps in exploring his affair, he spoke of how that relationship awakened desire in him in ways he never knew existed. He described the deep sense of feeling seen, felt, and understood. He could not recall a time in his life when he had so effortlessly been in the presence of someone who seemed simply to find pleasure in being with him, who delighted in him. He recalled how she created space for him to name, in the absence of judgment, those things in his life that were overwhelming and those things about himself that he hated the most.

When, I asked him, had anyone else been this eagerly interested in him while seeming to place so little demand on him? His reflection on this question led eventually to a moment he later described as a revelation.

It turned out that as a child Aaron had on many occasions longed to be seen and felt and heard. But the dynamics of his family prevented him from becoming aware of this, let alone expressing it. Instead, he simply and nonconsciously buried that longing under the work of survival. This was not obvious to him in the early stages of our work together; only as he began to risk being curious about his story did he begin to notice *that* he wanted, and only then did he begin to approach *what* he wanted.

He told of growing up in a family that was chaotic despite overtones of religious piety and weekly church attendance. His father's unpredictable outbursts (directed especially toward Aaron's siblings) had him running for cover to his room whenever the specter of his father's anger emerged. Being the middle of five children, Aaron was able to fade into the woodwork of his family despite the frequent shrapnel flying around the house. This penchant for camouflage protected him from his father's temper and his mother's enabling behavior. Aaron did his best to avoid standing out—except in his schoolwork, where he excelled.

His ability to work hard and be rewarded with good grades and attention from teachers led Aaron to develop a narrative in which the necessary sensation of acceptance—of being desired—was neurally spliced together with his working hard to achieve it. The notion that someone could possibly desire him apart from his hard work simply was not part of his mind's neurobiological or relational landscape. When he had a deeply meaningful spiritual awakening in college, his encounter with Jesus, albeit real, was not separate from his implicitly remembered narrative. Despite what Aaron's left brain heard about God's love for him, his right brain had not facilitated an actual, embodied experience of what love "meant" in real time and space. Yes, he felt the love of God, but the neural payload of all the years prior was not about to vanish quietly overnight. His anticipation of fear and shame should his weakness or imperfection be exposed was far more entrenched in his mind than he knew.

You may be reading this and asking, "Okay, so what's the problem? I still don't see how that set him up to have an affair." Let's delve a little deeper.

Doubtless, we parents hope our children will exhibit the character traits of resilience, kindness, courage, and depth far into adulthood and after we're gone. And Aaron had plenty of all of that. Being a good soldier was not a problem for him. The problem was the degree to which his soldiering covered the deeper waters of longing he didn't know he had. Neither of his parents was able to mentalize him (imagine what he was thinking and respond accordingly) in a way that provided an opportunity for him to ask the questions or speak the thoughts peppering his young mind: *What if all I believe about God isn't true? How do we know the resurrection is real? What am I supposed to do about sex? (And if it's so great, why does everyone seem so uncomfortable talking about it?) Who and what are females anyway? I hate how uncomfortable I feel around people I don't know well. What does it really mean to grow up, and why do I seem so afraid of it?*

Aaron was longing to be seen and heard in ways his parents simply did not recognize. They were not horrible people, and they loved their son. But not even Mary the mother of Jesus could see everything for what it

was while parenting her boy (see Mark 3:20-24). If she had trouble with this, we all will—we can count on it. In fact, there's an endless list of people who sit in my office and recount to me that they grew up in a loving Christian home. And for many this is code for, "Life sucked, but I can't really say that out loud. I would just be complaining about something I have no right to complain about."

Aaron was just such a person. His desire was like a wellspring that had been capped off to keep it from overrunning and flooding the area at which it emerged. But water is a funny thing. Only with great force can it be held in place. And when it rises fast and deep, even the most brilliantly engineered structures cannot stop its movement. Eventually it finds its way to the surface, sweeping everything in its path to the ocean, caring not a whit who or what it takes with it. This is what happened to Aaron.

DESIRE AND DISINTEGRATION

At the same time, the human race is as impulsive and consumptive as it has ever been. The automaticity with which we indulge ourselves in "what we want" is deeply embedded, both interpersonally and neurobiologically. Our ability to delay gratification and demonstrate restraint is severely underdeveloped in a world where we are routinely primed and prompted to "do what I want, when I want, how I want." AT&T knows this and is more than happy to encourage and exploit this posture.²⁸ It's a big reason I have a job as a psychiatrist.

But we are, it turns out, out of conscious touch with our deepest longings. Of course, we say we desire good relationships, well-paying jobs, comfortable homes, and opportunities to enjoy life in the "pursuit of happiness." Those are the things we are willing to admit in public. But privately, our desire for more goods, more ease and convenience, more sex and pleasure—whatever we can addictively turn to that we believe will relieve us from the stress of modern life—has us pinned to the ground. Those desires reveal their darker side when they morph into predatory behavior, greed, consumption, and contempt, all of which not only ruin our personal lives but poison our public lives as well. How we

act on these fleeting longings often leads people to my office, as was the case for Aaron.

Evil does its best work in the middle of good work being done, and Aaron's story was no exception. For truly, it is a thin line that separates our longing for beauty and goodness from our exploitation of them. Aaron had been influential in the best of ways as he followed his heart's desire to exercise his gifts as a preacher, teacher, and caretaker of his parishioners' spiritual formation. Unfortunately, those longings became tangled in ones he didn't even know he had, yearnings that originated in the first two decades of his life. For humans to flourish, we must awaken to the fundamental nature and purpose of desire and the critical role it plays in the problems we face in everyday life—problems that range from inner conflicts to cultural conflagrations, problems like the ones Aaron was facing. In fact, our “problems”—not least our greatest relational sufferings—are directly related to misdirected and unmet desire.



My own personal story highlights how, when it comes to desire, our mind's pendulum can swing between denial and diffusion. On the one hand, we can bury our desire under denial without even knowing we are doing it (as was often my case); on the other hand, we can impulsively act on desire whenever and however we want, to the point that it reaches a state of diffusion—so diluted that it ceases to have power for creativity. As such, I have to admit that the idea of wading into the topic of desire at first made me nervous and at times still does. My parents loved God and loved me, but that love was intertwined with their own unfinished emotional business. They were in many respects deeply devout people, but they had their own woundedness and had not fully come to terms with it. They instilled in me a love of God and neighbor reflected in a conviction to intervene on behalf of those who were treated unjustly. They taught me to be kind, disciplined, and persevering. There is very little good in my character that is not rooted in my life with my parents. But that is not the whole story.

My father, a kind, affectionate, and just man, could also be stern with his sons and our mother. No one would ever accuse him of being an angry man, but that was to some degree because we worked hard not to incite him. One of his standard responses whenever there was a conflict between us that generated even a hint of tearfulness was, “You stop your crying, or I’ll give you something to cry about.” (I sometimes wonder if this was the single standard-issue instructional tool parents at that time were given when they were sent home from the hospital with their child.) I remember once opening the hatch on the cover of his pickup truck bed too quickly, not realizing how close he was to it. The hatch struck him in the face, bloodying his mouth. What I noticed was how surprised—and relieved—I was at his restrained, “It’s okay. I’m all right” response. Again, it was not common for him to offer a harsh outburst. But it happened frequently and forcefully enough that the absence of it was what caught my attention, revealing to me, even at the age of fifteen, the “bracing for impact” undercurrent running subtly under the surface of my relationship with him.

My mother, a person devoted to prayer and the study of the Scriptures, whose life was transformed by her conversion to follow Jesus, was also anxious about a great many things. She grew up functionally as an orphan and suffered untold relational traumas, and she often seemed on the verge of the next potential loss, her relationship with God not the least. She didn’t say that, of course. But I felt her worry about what God would think about any number of things should we make a mistake in judgment.

I recall as a boy of about ten years old playing football with my friends in our front yard on a warm summer Wednesday evening. Wednesdays were the nights our church held a midweek meeting, when about fifteen people would gather for prayer and Bible study led by our pastor. I was the only person—ever—under the age of forty who attended these gatherings, and I was there every time my parents were. On this particular night, only my mother was planning to attend (a fact that the attuned reader realizes is important). She came out of our house and in front of my friends asked, “Are you going to prayer meeting with me tonight?”

I replied, cautiously, “Do I have to?”

To which she responded, “Where do you think Jesus would want you to be?”

What I wanted but did not have the courage to say was, “I think he wants me here playing football with my friends.” Or, had I been even more courageous (or foolhardy), something akin to, “I’m not sure. Let me go ask your husband who apparently thinks it’s okay to stay home from prayer meeting tonight too.”

These are not stories of catastrophic deprivation or violence. My home was never a physically or emotionally dangerous place, as far as I was consciously aware. It was very much a place where I felt safe. But neither was it a place where I could be completely emotionally open, although I didn’t know it at the time. I was not aware then how much energy I was burning making sure I didn’t make my father angry or my mother anxious. As a result, the notion of what I wanted at any given time was always somewhat tenuous as an emotionally processed experience. It turns out that my desire was frequently viewed through a lens helping me ensure that whatever it was I was asking for was permissible to request. Consequently, if I was not certain in advance that my desire was valid, I simply didn’t ask. This didn’t mean I was never asked what I wanted or that I never asked for it myself; I did, and my parents were deeply generous. So the problem was not that I did not have desires or that I was unaware of them. Rather, the problem was my fear of naming my desire lest I make someone angry or anxious and my inability to tolerate the discomfort I would then feel. And that led me to practice becoming unaware of my desire in the deepest places.

These details of my story shine a spotlight on the significance of the relational process of attachment to human flourishing. The development of secure attachment is enabled by a child’s experience of feeling seen, soothed, safe, and secure.²⁹ We first must, literally, be seen across the entire breadth our emotional condition. When we are in distress, we need to be comforted, to be soothed. When we are soothed, we develop a sense of safety, of confidence in our bodies and in our environment, both physically and relationally.

As we will see later, however, we need to be made safe not only from outside forces but also from self-inflicted harm, both physical and emotional. This is where limits and boundaries become significant parts of our development and the shaping of our character (not least our desires): with our caretakers (and later ourselves) offering the word “no.” Hence, our desire needs to be validated in the context of proper boundaries, much like how the pruning of a tree channels its growth in a direction that produces fruit in the most bountiful way and also strengthens the life of the tree itself—all of which reflects the state of affairs in Eden at the conclusion of Genesis 2.

These three needs—to be seen, soothed, and safe—make way for the fourth: to be secure (collectively referred to here as the four s’s).³⁰ Security is about being able, in the face of feeling seen, soothed, and safe, to move away from our relational base and step out to take the risk of new adventure, whether that’s across the crib, across the room, or across the country. It means we are willing to try new things and make mistakes, even difficult ones, because we know we have a place to return to where we will once again be seen, soothed, and safe. It is significant to realize that the four s’s, although they develop in early childhood, are necessary for growth and integration throughout our lives. Our need to be seen, soothed, safe, and secure never stops. The only question is who is providing those experiences for us.

In my growing up years there were many ways in which I was seen, soothed, safe, and secure. But there were also many occasions when neither of my parents, despite their general posture of generosity and kindness, were curious about what I was thinking or feeling or sought to understand my behavior before acting on their own impulses of fear or anxiety. Rather, they simply operated as if I would respond to what they wanted me to do and be. But when what I wanted ran counter to their desires, or when I was angry with them, I was faced with contending with my father’s sternness or my mother’s anxiety. Hence, there were many times when I was not seen, soothed, or safe, and, without knowing it, I was kept from developing the security that would support healthy risk

taking. This affected decisions about my future, sex and relationships with women, and especially my sense of my relationship with God.

As we will see as we continue in this book, and as Aaron and so many others have discovered, to be seen, soothed, safe, and secure are necessary states of mind in our discovery of desire and in the setting of limits that channel desire into patterns of beauty and goodness. But the unhealed tracts of our soul's landscape, those that still wait to experience one or more of the four s's, distract us from or blind us to our longing. Our desire can become muted under the fear of relational affliction or misdirected in our attempt to cope with the pain of trauma. We do not nullify desire; we merely regulate it. We may try to redirect its course or seek to contain it, but we cannot extinguish it. For God has made us with desire for connection that ultimately leads to the co-creation of objects of goodness and beauty with him and others with whom we have difference, be it great or small.

This is as powerful and inevitable as gravity or the pull of the tides. We cannot overcome it. But in our pain that leads to avoiding desire, or in our haste to cope with unmet desire through an infinite array of addictions, we ultimately find ourselves in places of great desolation—and then in my office.

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