

Screwtape's Parenting Without Presence

“It is a joy to be hidden, but a disaster not to be found.”

D.W. Winnicott

*When parents' perceptions are trained in the
idealizations and counterfeits of pseudo-reality,
their children's true selves will remain unknown.
The reality of the Image of God will seem a rude insult
to their cultivated preference for
immediate, user-friendly pseudo-beauty.*

- Screwtape's Manual for Parent Training

Screwtape: So, Lasker, we've discussed the exploitation and degradation of love and the human heart—even though we don't completely understand those things. What next?

Lasker: Granduncle Screwtape, another thing I don't really get is why humans spend so much time and energy “raising” children. The results are much more exciting for us to watch if you just turn them loose to do what comes naturally!

S: Heh, heh. True, true, but we're actually getting there more quickly than you think, Lasker. Human parents are shooting for some vague sense of what it means to be a “grownup” person. But the confusion about what that amounts to is growing by the decade. We've arranged it so that parents' expectations of their children are quite different from the violent “problem-solving” and all-about-me renditions of love and sex their children see for thousands of hours growing up. It's a schizophrenic society!

And the parents are seeking something that some of them are conscious of and some are not. It has to do with that Image of God thing we mentioned earlier. Somehow, despite our efforts to the contrary, it grounds people in the basics of what it means to be human. And, like their foolish vulnerability and risk-taking in pursuit of love, we don't really understand the core of parental motivation. We have no use for such time-wasting softness.

- L: Yeah, our Father Satan's big success story – what they call The Fall and its consequences – keeps tripping them up, the “natural” way! Blindness rules!
- S: Ah, Lasker, you're full of ideas and theories, and you're right, but let's talk more specifically. For instance, how do you promote blindness in humans? And in parents particularly?
- L: Well, one way is emphasizing what they *want* to see, rather than what is actually there. Mirages, idealizations, that sort of thing. They're suckers for user-friendly gloss. I guess if we can't eradicate that Image, the next best thing is to distract them, and/or provide shiny counterfeits that make the real thing seem dull by comparison. As we mentioned, the media gets a lot of work done for us in that area.
- S: Good, but how does that apply to their parenting?
- L: Hmmm. I'm getting bored again...
- S: I don't blame you. This is way out of our realm of experience. It has to do with the human child's need to be seen accurately and loved – as a developmental necessity. You see, for some reason, humans have been created to relate to and socialize with each other in close, loving ways. They really like the phrase “to know and be known.”
- L: Headache coming on...
- S: You'll need to ignore your nausea and fear if you're going to get close enough to humans to do damage. Meanwhile, pay attention! Their young ones need face-to-face contact with loving parents for their brains and minds to develop the capacity for healthy, loving relationships. This is our earliest point of attack.
- L: Attack! Now you're talking.
- S: Yes. Remember my phrase “love without reality”? It applies to parenting too! (Screwtape lets out a self-congratulating chuckle.) Today's parents have grown up with lots of screen time, so they're steeped in idealizations (and degradations) about themselves and others. We've worked hard to drown out their ability to perceive themselves accurately. We've substituted a variety of eye-catching images of children, women, and men. Appearances-are-us, you know!
- L: Ugh! Where's the attack? Why all this talk about *perceptions*?
- S: Lasker, if we can get parents confused and blind as to what their goals are, that's half the battle! And if their media empires, as de facto cultural authorities, fill in the blanks left by that confusion, then we've won the other half! Parents raised in the media have a very hard time going against those cultural authorities and reducing

their own dependence on screens. So then they're blind to one of their biggest parenting enemies. They're not able to protect their children from a lifelong addiction to screens starting in toddlerhood.

L: Oh, I see. Give the parents an electronic cradle to "take care of" their children, and the kids will have it for life! *Haaa, ha ha!* I hear we even have agents developing robotic nannies for human children!

S: Yesss, you see the Achilles heel for most parents today is as old as the Fall. Fear of shame. They're so afraid of being failures as parents, they're practically paralyzed. They just can't go against what "everyone else" is doing.

L: You mean the teenagers can't?

S: No! I'm talking about the parents! Pay attention. One of the positive spinoffs for us in a world of electronic media is the enhancement it gives to that old fear of being the odd man out – of not fitting in – of missing something everyone else is involved in. Today almost the whole motivational system in screen-based culture comes down to narcissistic gratification and shame avoidance. These go hand in hand with constantly comparing oneself to others in an endless search for self-esteem. Advertising, which drives their economies and cultures, has groomed them for that. (Social media has piled on as a latecomer.) So, Lasker, if you want to set up fallen human beings with the utmost fear of being shown to be inadequate, let them be parents!

L: What?

S: Yes, it's another human thing we don't completely understand. Parents take themselves *very* seriously. If you want some entertainment, listen in on the parents' beating themselves up after the kids are in bed. For instance, "Oh, I *swore* I would *never* say that to *my* children!" Waaaaaaa!

They snort with sadistic satisfaction.

S: Then you move in and whisper to the one who's feeling the worst, a nice closer to a bad parenting day: "*You've ruined your child for life!*"

L: Great, Screwtape! I can't wait to try that one!

S: Ah, the deft use of mortifying shame... You know, Lasker, their media culture is such an accelerant to human shaming potential – instant worldwide exposure and comparisons. "What would I look like on camera?" etc. – I hope it doesn't put us all into retirement.

L: Not a chance! I'm seeing the value to us of the overall system. And if you add the degradation of their ability to socialize and form supportive communities – that media cultivation of suspicion and mistrust you mentioned in our last conversation – then parents will remain alone in their fears and paralyzing self-doubt. They won't be encouraging one another to take a stand against peer pressure. They won't form communities that give their children alternatives to "what everybody else is doing." Lone sheep and their children are easy pickings.

And have you ever heard one of those competitive conversations among a group of parents vying for self-esteem by comparing their children's accomplishments in school? *Yess!*

But, Screwtape, the developmental effects of the media on children are published in their scientific and medical journals. Why do parents still seem not to know them?

S: Our oldest tactic, plus one of their oldest vulnerabilities, Lasker. You know we do our best work when they don't know, or even believe, that the Big Boss, Satan, exists and is out to destroy them. It's not exactly like we announce our schemes and attacks ahead of time! So, as you mentioned, we present them with what they *want* to hear. Parents don't *want* to realize there's a major problem here. The cultural infrastructure of cameras and screens they've come to live by seems too important to be seriously questioned – too big to fail them and their children.

L: Ah, of course. People are predictable that way.

S: So "parenting without presence" is our goal. Has been for centuries. We used to directly attack what they call the "nuclear family" – parents together with their children. (Our Enemy's original design.) We've succeeded in getting the divorce rate up, breaking up the family quite a bit – with devastating effects I don't mind boasting!

L: I'm luvin' it! Go, Screwtape!

S: But today, with the increase in reach and access to human minds the media affords us, we don't really care where the parents are in relation to their children *physically*. We focus on where the parents and children are *mentally*. Even when they're in the same house – or the same living room – we've arranged it so they're not truly present to one another.

L: Ah, yes. Like their old Greek myth about sirens distracting ships off course onto the rocks. Our media friends are producing sirens and idols for them daily – distracting them from real life and relationships! So the more "realistic" they think their screen presentations are, the better! Our plan succeeds as long as we continue to reduce family face-to-face time. Do you know where your children's minds are? Absolutely NOT! Ahh, ha ha!

S: One more thing. That artificial brain-stimulation-on-demand from screens makes reading seem dull to kids. We want children to have no taste for reading – nor brain capacity for it. We don't want them to be able to think or reason deeply about the meanings of things – what childhood book reading can develop in them. But even more crucially, they won't have the capacity for or interest in reading our Enemy's Word. They won't develop the discernment of reality, and the faith and courage, that come from reading it. Then the battle for their minds and hearts will be played out in the "experiences" of their screen life: the turf where *our* powers and principalities steer the agendas...our killing fields.

L: YEAH!

They pant and drool.

S: But speaking of sirens and idols and distractions, one of my favorite things is how the media stimulation of the brain counterfeits not only real human presence, but our Enemy's presence as well.

L: Does it?

S: Ha! They didn't teach *that* in your marketing classes, eh? Since you wowed me with brain science in our first conversation, I've been studying up a bit. There's something called the dopamine system in the brain. I think that's what we can artificially stimulate as a counterfeit for, among other things, our Enemy's presence. Humans love it! And no wonder, if it was originally intended as the joy of our Enemy's ways of living life. One of their brain scientists quotes a guy in an experiment with the dopamine system years ago. Listen to the description the man gave of having that area of his brain awakened after years of it being shut down:

I feel saved...resurrected, reborn. I feel a sense of health amounting to Grace...I feel like a man in love. I have broken through the barriers which cut me off from love.¹

L: Whoa! What is he *talking* about!?

S: And, further, that scientist explained the meaning of the dopamine system for humans. He says it

drives and energizes many mental complexities that humans experience as persistent feelings of interest, curiosity, sensation seeking, and...the search for higher meaning.

S: That scientist called the dopamine system the "seeking system."² So, if we can hijack and overstimulate that part of the brain with screen time, they'll seek and seek in

cyberspace, but end up in arid places. They'll follow our mental detours around their true identities, and the real love our Enemy offers them. We lock them into self-perpetuating cycles of trying to fill emptiness with mirages.

They both guffaw uproariously!

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

Psalm 63:1

...he was lost, and is found.

Luke 15:32c

Peter Schmidt is a professional counselor living in Virginia.
To learn more about the impact of media on our
identities and relationships, read his 2017 book

**How Did Love Become a Reality Show?
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1. Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 144.
2. Emily Yoffe, "Seeking: How the Brain Hard-Wires Us to Love Google, Twitter, and Texting. And Why That's Dangerous," *Slate*, August 12, 2009.

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