



Stewardship

A WAY OF LIVING

Still Face

The Stewardship of Attention – (Part two)

“Hey baby, is that mommy’s little girl?” The baby strapped into the highchair beams up at her mom, her eyebrows lifting, her eyes creasing into a pleasurable smile.

The baby reaches out, putting her tiny hands inside her mother’s as they smile and coo at each other. Everything is beautiful . . . until it isn’t.

A researcher standing to one side, stopwatch in hand, nods at the mother. The mother looks away over one shoulder, then turns back to look at the child. The mother’s face, which only a moment before was alive and vivacious, connected and present, is passive. She is still looking at the child, but now her eyes, so expressive a moment before, are vacant.

The baby, who is only a year old, notices immediately. She sits up straight,

and one tiny eyebrow raises.

Something is wrong here, she thinks.

Baby goes into action. She waves at the mother. Points to the side to make her look.

Nothing.

Baby smiles and claps her hands.

Nothing.

Baby stops, confused. She makes a high-pitched, screechy sound. Mother doesn’t respond.

She stuffs her fists into her mouth, staring at her mother.

Baby lets out a whimper and reaches for mother.

Nothing.

Baby turns away, face distressed.

Looks back at mother.

Mother doesn't move.

The baby's face crumples, her arms coming up, crossed in front of her anguished face. Her body twists in the highchair restraints as her posture collapses because of nervous system overload. She is sobbing.

It degrades even further. The baby, having exhausted all her resources to bring her mother "back," visibly turns inward on herself, emotionally withdrawing, her tiny face sagging into hopelessness.

The researcher glances at his stopwatch. Time elapsed since mother went "still face" is two minutes. He nods to the mother.

Instantly the mother comes alive, leaning in to talk to the baby, taking the baby's hands in hers. Coos at her baby. Leaning in, lips parted, eyes wide, and engaged. Fully present, there.

The child begins to respond. Warily. Uncertain. Hesitant. The relationship she thought she had with her mother is now uncertain; her tiny defenses are up. The relationship, at least to some degree, is temporarily damaged.

This experiment, called the still-face experiment, was pioneered by child researcher Edward Tronick in the 1970s. It has been repeated hundreds of times since

then with babies ranging from only weeks old to 2.5 years old or more.

Tiny humans react to the loss of ability to get their parents' attention with a flow of confusion, panic, loss, and then hopelessness as the tragedy of the situation unfolds. Children will go into hysterics, wailing and trying anything they can think of to establish the connection, including attacking the parent if they can reach them. And that's not all.

When children are subjected to the still face experiment again weeks later, they panic even earlier as they recognize the stressful pattern. They are harder to reconnect with afterward. Shutting down becomes a survival response, as their tiny brains shut out the overloaded circuits. If the baby doesn't get the chance to reconnect, things are even worse.

All is not well in the human family.

I think a common response to this is an indignant, "They shouldn't do experiments like that on innocent babies."

We should save our indignation. It will be needed.

The mother sat, spoon hanging in midair in front of the baby's face, looking down into the glowing screen, her thumb

pushing the endless scroll . . . up . . . up . . .
up.

The baby, mouth now empty, leans forward to get the bite wobbling on the tilting spoon.

“Momma?”

Nothing.

Baby raises an eyebrow and stuffs both fists into her mouth.

Nothing. Mamma scrolls to a new screen.

Baby lets out a little whimper.

Nothing.

Baby puts her hands in front of her face and lets out a high-pitched, screechy sound, and slaps at her mother’s hand, which has drifted out of reach.

The laboratory experiment of the 1970s is here, but now, unlike the nicely controlled and safeguarded conditions in the lab, it is wild, unfettered, and unbound. What began in the lab is now a continuous, uncontrolled experiment running in “the wild.” There is no two-minute rule here. There is no lab assistant to ensure the mother safely reconnects with the child.

In 1970, Herbert A. Simon said, “What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information

creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.”

Could Herbert, when he said this in 1970, have even imagined the age we live in now? Maybe not, but his observation is still dead on. When the information flow is limitless, and attention is not, we run genuine risks. Risks of shortages, famine, malnutrition, and death. What will happen to all the children being raised today under the conditions described above?

It will not be good. The damage will not end when they reach adulthood.

Emotional neglect, not giving children the attention they need, has been linked to a lot of nasty outcomes.

With anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma, and the inability to connect normally to others, they go out into the world unprepared for what it will throw at them.

Neglect seems to affect the brain’s development, particularly in areas that regulate things like attention, learning, social skills, the ability to build healthy relationships, and areas of emotional and mental stability.

Also, because children raised like this don’t really know how to parent

otherwise, they pass it on . . . and on. That book, magazine, or smartphone in our hand may very well have a direct and highly negative effect on our grandchildren.

In an environment where information is limitless and attention is not, where children can “starve” for attention and the effects of that starvation can persist for life, even for generations, we have a moral obligation to steward our attention.

We would be outraged at a man who threw his wages away on trivial things while his wife and children starved at home. If we saw one of his children years later as an adult still crippled and bearing the scars of malnutrition, we would likely feel harsh toward the father, even if he’s already moldering in the grave.

Are we doing better?

Emotional neglect does not just affect the “emotional stuff.” It turns into hard numbers of other physical ailments, including higher risks of heart disease, stroke, and a much higher risk of developing dementia late in life.

We outgrow the need for attention from others the way we outgrow our need for food. We don’t. Instead, we die younger.

In 2014, the Surgeon General of the United States set off across the country talking and listening to his fellow

Americans. He was surprised by what he found.

In 2023, he released a public letter about a major health threat affecting Americans.

Loneliness.

According to the letter, the health effects of being lonely, of failing to have an authentic connection with others is an even greater threat than the risks associated with obesity and physical inactivity. It is similar to the damage caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

Do we, who would never think of exposing our children to some things because of the risks, inadvertently expose them to worse risks just by our failure to be emotionally present?

The thing is . . . we do owe our children a proper amount of our attention. To refuse to pay up, so we can spend it on something else, is immoral.

We have to put down our things and pay attention to our children as if they matter, because they do. We can choose to do that, though in today’s environment, our attentional budget, like our financial budget, might have to be severely restricted to “make ends meet.”

It doesn’t just stop with children.

“Honey, will you . . . oh.” She stopped in the doorway, tablet in hand.

He sat leaning back in his chair, one leg on the footrest, his phone pressed to his head. “That’s right,” he said, his voice enthusiastic, nodding against his phone. “He’s the best guide on Lake Erie. If you get him lined up for Saturday, I’ll pay half the bill.” He chuckled. “Never waste a Saturday during walleye season, is what I say.” He chuckled again, not seeing his wife standing in the doorway.

She turned away. Twenty minutes later, hearing him hang up, she was back, her tablet still in hand, her face uncertain. Seating herself on the edge of the couch, she said. “Uh . . . do . . . do you have a minute? There are a few things we need to talk about.”

“Uh . . . ok.” The energy in his voice dropped dramatically, flattening. “Sure.”

Her voice was hesitant. “I’m worried about Fred. He’s not doing well in school.”

“Oh. What’s the problem?” he asked, picking up a magazine and flipping it open.

“He’s not doing well with the others at recess.”

“Oh.” He turned a page. “Probably just shy.”

“No. His teacher is afraid that he’s just not socially ready for first grade yet.”

He sat for a long moment staring at the page while she waited, the lamplight falling across her pale hands folded over her tablet.

She sat like that, staring at him while he stared down at the page, his face flat, disconnected.

A series of rapid expressions flashed across her tired, expressive face. Fear, panic, anger, loss, depression, despair.

A moment later she stood, tablet falling half-open, onto the living room floor. “Fine,” she said. “I guess when you’re ready to talk about it, we’ll do it *then*.”

She walked out. He looked up, stunned, at her departing back, then down at the tablet where it lay. At the handwritten list on its open front page.

It was a short list, written in an open, feminine hand:

Things we need to talk about:

Fred’s conduct at school

Getting the garden tilled

My nephew’s wedding

He sat blinking at it.

In the bedroom, she flopped onto the bed and, grabbing a book, made a furious attempt at reading. It was no use, her tears making the page blur and swim before her eyes. *Why*, she thought, *why doesn’t he*

*listen to me? Why doesn't he pay attention? He sure does to all those other people. And why, why do I just come apart like this? I can't get his attention and suddenly feel like I can't breathe. I can't think. I can't do anything. I'm an **adult**. Why can't I just shrug it off like it's no big deal? Why?*

Because we never really outgrow it. We don't outgrow the need for emotional attunement any more than we outgrow the need for food. We just get better at hiding the emotional effects. Except sometimes we don't.

How many men have, in the middle of a conversation they are "sort of" paying attention to, suddenly found themselves "attacked" by a spouse but have no idea why?

Where did that come from? they wonder.

It came from their inadvertent running of the still-face experiment.

When we see a person we are emotionally connected to go still-face on us, it activates the same neural circuits of the brain as physical pain. It's interesting that we who would not dream of inflicting physical pain on a loved one will inadvertently stoop to causing the same levels of pain when we are distracted by

reading, technology, or self-absorption. Clearly, we don't want to do that.

There has to be a solution.

And of course, there is.

The problem is stopping what we are doing to respond to every little thing from a loved one. I mean, we're *busy*. Do I really need to stop what I'm doing to respond to a passing comment from my wife about the weather?

Yes.

If I were being visited by the president or some other person who, in my mind, was very important, and he made some passing comment to me, I wouldn't just keep reading and not acknowledge that, no matter how irrelevant it was. We don't act that way when we really care. We certainly wouldn't make some sarcastic comment about the person commenting.

The problem is that this readiness to respond requires sacrifice. They might be small sacrifices individually, but they just keep coming, and we can get tired, absorbed by some work problem, or just plain selfish because we'd rather keep reading. This is understandable but scarcely commendable.

Jesus is our example.

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ and Christ's cousin, had just been

beheaded, and the disciples came and told Christ.

Christ, who was so beset by crowds that He had no time, not even to eat, immediately said to His disciples, “Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while.”

So they went. But the people followed, and Christ, seeing them “as sheep not having a shepherd,” and despite the pressing physical and emotional needs He had, “began to teach them many things.”

He was available, even to the point of sacrifice. In the New Testament, we are directly pointed to His example in our relationship with our wives.

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.”

Christ, then as now, was available.

While this verse is talking specifically about husbands and wives, I believe that it can be more broadly viewed as the proper response to anyone who has a legitimate claim on our time. Certainly our children would be included.

But I think sometimes we actually do better at the major claims on us than we do on the minor ones. At least that’s the way I find it. It’s a struggle for me. But . . . we can learn. We can grow.

Yesterday I was walking across our front porch with this subject on my mind and was passing my two-year-old daughter, Josie. She was crouched on the concrete, rolling a piece of sidewalk chalk back and forth. She looked up at me and smiled. “Daa,” she said.

On inspiration, I squatted down, took the chalk from her and quickly sketched a fat little girl, calling it by my endearing nickname for her. I narrated as I drew, adding a bottle in the figure’s one hand, complete with a nipple and a few chalk marks to show the milk in it. I drew a tiny doll baby in the other, added a few squiggles on top for hair, grinned, gave her the chalk and kept walking. It took me maybe 90 seconds.

But today, when my wife was leading her across the porch, Josie had to stop and show it to her. “Daa,” she said, “Draw.”

It’s really in the small attentions, as well as the big ones, that we build relationships. It’s there that we either meet the pressing attentional needs of our family or we fail them. It’s there we demonstrate our Christlike provision or fail in our stewardship.

It's there, just there, we show either the damaging selfishness of the still face, or the radiant love of the face of God.

And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them.

But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and

forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.

Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.

Mark 10:13-16



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