Embracing the Flesh: In Praise of the Natural Man

Paul R. Cazier

Tis the sublime of Man,
Our noontide majesty, to know ourselves
Parts and proportions of a wondrous whole.
—Samuel Coleridge

TEN YEARS AGO I CUT TO PIECES ANOTHER HUMAN BEING. Using scalpel, electric bone saw and tweezers, and blunt dissection, I slowly removed the flesh from her body over a six-month period. I was never arrested, nor charged with any crime. In fact, I was encouraged by the society around me. It was considered part of the learning process.

The most fascinating part of my first year in medical school was the chance to jump into the muck, elbows deep, and christen strange gray and yellow objects the "thoracic duct" or the "ansa cervicalis." With four students to a cadaver, we vied for the best position from which to skin limbs, isolate nerves, and be the first to discover a major artery. It was exhilarating.

Toward the end of the two quarters of dissection, our cadaver became a cornucopia of landmarks. She looked less and less human as we progressively removed tissue. We finally, unceremoniously, detached her skull from her first cervical vertebra. This left only her pharyngeal muscles, trachea, and nerves and vessels to hang loosely, like life-strings, between her head and neck. This allowed us to dissect her larynx, the voice box that would object if it could to our intrusion.

During the entire process of memorization, dissection, and class lec-

ture, many opportunities arose for waxing philosophical. There in front of the four of us, on the cold steel dissection table, was our future. Our cadaver testified of human mortality, to the time when we too would rot, our complex organic molecules breaking down to more basic constituents.

Through the experience of cutting apart another human being, I concluded that life is a beautiful and natural marvel. And though I found no seat for the soul hidden amid the sulci or gyri of her brain, there was a certain vitality to our cadaver. That macabre wreckage seemed to tell us that yes, someone was here once, long before we arrived. While walking among the dead, sticking our faces into ancient cavities, fondling the viscera that once digested Thanksgiving meals, we "listened" as these wise cadavers divulged their contents.

Now, more than ten years later, I no longer go home each night smelling like formaldehyde, with yellow pieces of cadaver fat in my hair. I miss it. But my preoccupation with the human body continues. As a neuroradiologist, I look at the human form, specifically the head, neck, and spine, on a daily basis. Instead of a scalpel, we use the cross-sectional techniques of computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance (MR) imaging to display detailed human anatomy, depicted as subtle shades of gray on film. In this "decade of the brain," I find learning about the central nervous system a great challenge. And, in our role as imaging consultants, we are often the first to see the inflammation, infection, and tumors that will forever alter the lives of the patients before us. Like those first months as a medical neophyte ten years ago, I am still in awe of the human form or, what I will call for the purpose of this essay, "the natural man."

Mormons believe that the natural man is but a part, a "proportion," of our total being. Mormonism teaches that we are, each of us, a triumvirate when we emerge as infants on the earth: intelligence wrapped in spirit encased in corruptible flesh. There is little information on the first, our eternal "intelligence," which forever separates us into individual entities that were harvested from the cosmos by a loving creator. We learn about this aspect of ourselves only sporadically, in the theological attics of our weekly church services. For the most part, our religion speaks of our being spiritual children of God who came to this earth to "obtain a body," among other things.

Therefore I own or possess my body. It is a temple, I am told, and I am to respect and take care of it, like a new car or a porcelain vase. However, most of the time I feel as though I am not the owner of a body, but a body itself. During my first anatomy practical exam ten years ago, when pneumonia racked my lungs and I walked among the corpses, occasionally coughing uncontrollably, raining pneumococci germs on exposed

gall bladders and uteruses (in a futile attempt to infect the deceased with death), I felt it was *I* who was ill, not some abstract chariot of my spirit. Ironically, or perhaps as a design of my creator, it is my natural, biological identity with which I have the most experience. Despite living for an eternity as intelligence, then a spirit child, I only occasionally catch glimpses, now and then, of my spirituality. As far as I can tell, I am inextricably immersed in the flesh.

The natural man has much to say about God and the world in which we find ourselves. Unfortunately, the natural man has often been relegated to something base, perverted, or repulsive. I think of the sacrifice of celibate priests or ascetic Hindus who live to avoid "physical illusion." Clearly, the human body and the tangibleness of existence have been belittled for centuries. Indeed, King Benjamin reminds us in the Book of Mormon that "the natural man is an enemy of God" (Mosiah 3:19). We are therefore told that only by "putting off" the natural man do we worship in spirit and find proximity to God.

To be sure, when scriptural authors speak of "the natural man," or "our nature," they are referring to our human character and conduct that so often fails to please God and ennoble us. In this light the apostle Paul admonishes the Romans that "to be spiritually minded is life and peace," and "they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:6, 8). Obviously, Paul is condemning the carnality of certain people, not their "flesh"—not their biology (without which there is no life as we know it). We therefore conclude that Paul and other righteous people have explained the way to heaven by employing the flesh of man as a metaphor for sin and the evil within us.

Yet these metaphorical indictments of our physical state can have an insidious effect on our attitudes. There is much in the scriptures and orthodox Christian teachings that fosters spiritual elitism, where the body is ugly, menstruation is unclean, leprosy, mental illness, and other diseases are curses, and death is an abhorrent mistake of the Fall.

I doubt that human biology and the requirements of heaven are incompatible. My cadaver, one of God's spirit children (*sans* spirit), was a great communicator. Cutting into her was like a dialogue. She told me that the natural man or woman is an amazing symphony of biochemistry and physiology. She said that we cannot escape this biological form while reaching for higher, spiritual planes. (Not in so many words, of course).

We, as Mormons, generally do better than orthodox Christianity in emphasizing the eternal nature of our physical bodies. Still we often speak of our flesh as simply a covering for our spirit, as if it were NASA's most recent space suit on loan to us, enabling us to interact with this alien physical world. Rarely do we adequately acknowledge the body as more than a mere tool. Mormonism can do better in its praise of the natural man.

The Origin of Man

What are the steps toward a complete celebration of the natural man? First, and most important, we must understand our origins. Biological life and the natural man have a long history, more complex and mysterious than the sterile, tidy assertions from sacrament meeting pulpits. Thus I am not content being told simply that God created life on this earth. I want to know the process by which it occurred. I would love to understand how the eye or the middle ear structures evolved and how the complex folding of the cerebral hemispheres occurs. Though the church speaks of my spiritual origins, I am no less interested in the origin of my mitochondria (the ancient, bacteria-like, energy factories in all our cells). After all, just as there is a wonderful story associated with our spiritual genesis, scientists speak of an equally marvelous 3.5-billion-year long creation story surrounding the birth of our bodies. The natural man, our intimate associate on the earth, deserves mention.

I distinctly remember the powerful impact Duane Jeffrey's 1973 *Dialogue* article, "Seers, Savants, and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," had on me as a teenager some seven years after it was published. In it Jeffrey outlines the church's long history of less than salutary pronouncements on biological evolution.[1] Yet it had a calming influence on me. The article made it clear that the church was at least officially neutral on the matter of evolution. I would not, I learned, be ostracized from my ethnic and religious moorings for entertaining scientific theories. My personal theological crisis was attenuated, to a large extent, by that article.

Still, that interface has indeed been uncomfortable for me. One prominent example comes to mind from my mission to Japan fourteen years ago. While my companion and I were teaching a discussion to a family of four, the young teenage son spoke up, gathering some inner courage to ask, "What about science and evolution? Does your church condemn such things?" I felt my gut tighten. I identified with his question, a question that I was still struggling with in my own mind. I felt for him, his need to know if religion meant that he would have to give up "belief" in the wonderful array of scientific ideas that he was being exposed to in his Japanese high school.

My companion happened to be teaching as that question was presented. As if responding to a preprogrammed set of instructions inside a missionary mind, he answered that evolution was contrary to the teachings of our church and not consistent with God's plan of salvation.

I was furious. In my mind I could not let my companion blithely smear science. I interrupted him, saying, undoubtedly with some emo-

1. Duane E. Jeffrey, "Seers, Savants and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Autumn/Winter 1973): 41-75.

tion, just the opposite, that we do not know how God created humankind; that evolution is neither embraced nor rejected by Mormons.

Naturally, the boy was not impressed with our duality of ideas. Nor was I. My companion did not appear to mind my interruption and we said little upon returning to our apartment that night. It affected me enough, however, that in my weekly letter to my mission president, I asked him to clarify how we, as missionaries, should answer questions on evolution. The president never responded. I later heard from the mission secretary that the president took some delight in my superfluous worries, implying that my six months in the mission home as financial secretary had acquainted the president with my tendency to "think too much."

On a larger scale, the church has struggled with the question of how to teach us members about the origin of our bodies. In several Gospel Doctrine classes I've attended, there have been as many personal interpretations of Genesis as people in class. Some have described evolution as one of the "seven deadly sins," parroting what some church leaders have written on the topic. Others have expressed more of an open mind.

That evolution continues to be taught in science classes at Brigham Young University is an admission of how pervasive the theory is in all aspects of biological science. Numerous fields of science use the theory and its corollaries. Indeed, every student graduating from BYU is likely to encounter the theory, including those who go to graduate school in the biological sciences, medicine, dentistry, and others. The administration at BYU is aware that were they to stop teaching evolution, BYU would cease to function as a recognized university and would, in the eyes of the world (especially the world of higher education), be little more than a seminary that shields its students from the full measure of scientific ideas.

Although I am pleased the church is not frightened of discussing evolution, we church members should also be prepared for further discoveries into our biological origins. Just as physicists are stepping closer to an understanding of matter, so too are biologists beginning to appreciate how life, "in all its variety," came into being. If it turns out that science succeeds in explaining in detail how life came into being, we should feel no less marveled by the sapient creators we worship and the natural law they employed in creating the natural man. A healthy appreciation of our biological selves and the discoveries of science gives praise to God, the creator.

Though most biochemistry text books are vague on the exact mechanism, most scientific theories of life's origin relate in some way to what has been called the Oparin-Haldane theory, the legendary "primordial

soup."[2] Yet ever since 1953 when University of Chicago scientists Stanley Miller and Harold Urey created a few amino acids in a flask by applying an electrical charge to a mixture of ammonia, methane, hydrogen cyanide, and water vapor, this soup is routinely taken for granted. The problem of life's origin has been solved, some foolishly assume.

This hit home for me several years ago when I visited Chicago's massive Museum of Science and Industry on the shore of Lake Michigan. In this ornate museum one finds on display an unbridled celebration of human ingenuity, from the steam engine to quantum mechanics and superconductivity. Yet, despite amazing displays of biology and human physiology, for me there is a most disappointing display, sequestered away on the second floor in an obscure corner. There a grainy video tape with distorted sound shows the gourmet cook Julia Child preparing "primordial soup" by mixing together similar ingredients used in Miller-Urey's experiment. Although tongue-in-check, the display gives one the idea that life's origin can be reduced to a cooking recipe. The meaning and uniqueness of life itself are lost through such a portrayal.

We have a responsibility, then, both to appreciate the importance of our physical origin and to provide meaning to that wonderful process. Such an awareness would complement the already extraordinary emphasis the LDS temple endowment ceremony places on the symbolic representation of life's genesis. Our appreciation for all life would undoubtedly be enriched as well. We share some DNA gene sequences and many biochemical reactions with most of the earth's organisms. We and all animals are more than cousins; we are the same flesh.

Physical Suffering

Like animals, we also suffer in the flesh. The pain of physical suffering is a special burden that the natural man must endure. Our bodies are exposed to an incredible spectrum of insult, both human-made suffering and the suffering which comes from living in a world of natural law. Over a decade of exposure to medicine, I have become more skeptical of its ability to cure, more amazed that our bodies do not disintegrate in an instant from any number of traumas or neoplasias or infections.

We came to this earth to gain experience, we are told. Part of that experience is suffering. It is our physical body that is the object, invariably, of that suffering. It is our colons which become cancerous, our brains which demyelinate, our bones which fracture, and the vessels of our hearts which clog with atherosclerotic plaques. If the body of man is to be

2. Robert Shapiro, *Origins: A Skeptic's Guide to the Creation of Life on Earth* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 49.

praised, surely it is because the natural man wears the scars of disease, war, and pain.

But is physical suffering simply "experience"? I doubt it. As I've watched patients with chronic diseases, I think there is something inherently obscene in equating suffering with experience only. We trivialize the suffering and mindless carnage rampant on this earth by dismissing them as merely part of God's plan or part of "our education." People who have experienced chronic pain for most of their lives do not accumulate "new experience" by placing it into some unseen sack which they later show God. They are changed; their flesh is different. I do not, therefore, perceive the natural man as a shell around our spirit, unconnected to that which rises from the dust. We enter the next life transformed by the sufferings we encounter in the flesh.

Not only do we change when the dark hour of suffering comes upon our physical form, so too does our concept of justice. During my flight to Tokyo, I read Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* A professor earlier that year at Utah State University had suggested it to me. In it Rabbi Kushner examines the problem of evil in light of his son's tragic death from progeria, a rare condition in which the body ages rapidly. Kushner's personal theodicy was that God is not all-powerful. Human suffering "angers and saddens God even as it angers and saddens us."[3] It was perhaps, in some cosmic sense, no accident that I was reading that book at that particular time, 1 September 1983. For while I read, another Boeing 747 several hundred miles away to the east off the coast of Russia, filled with people reading, laughing, and perhaps thinking about God, was shot down by a Soviet fighter near the island of Sakhalin. The 269 Koreans who lost their lives in that tragic mistake, a mistake the United States would repeat in the summer of 1988 by downing an Iranian airliner in the Persian Gulf, were remembered and their loss was felt in Tokyo when I arrived.

All of us are moved to rethink the Plan of Salvation when we are forced to watch our loved ones suffer in the flesh. We have made progress in our attitudes about the etiology of physical suffering. We no longer assume someone has sinned when he or she suffers physical pain, a mistake Job's friends made many years ago. Perhaps Rabbi Kushner is correct and God's power is limited in many respects to explain what goes on beneath him. God appears less responsible for "calling people home" than are fatty cholesterol deposits in the intima of our arteries. As we learn more about natural processes of death and disease, Mormons must surrender the notion that God is behind every tumor or every stroke.

---

3. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 55.

The question of meaning must be addressed: Is there meaning to the insult a body will encounter in this life? For a young child to be devastated by a infiltrating brain tumor, a not uncommon finding where I work, one cannot help but wonder if there is a divine plan here, not just chaos.

One attempt to give meaning to this apparent chaos comes from a talk I heard given by Elder Neal A. Maxwell in Tokyo towards the end of my mission. Elder Maxwell implored us to have a "sense of history" and not to be concerned with those things which will not rise with us in the resurrection. He acknowledged our "suffering" as missionaries and consoled us with a unique concept that I hear only infrequently in church meetings. He spoke of Christ's atonement and how he not only took upon himself our sins, but our diseases and sicknesses as well (an idea supported by scripture such as Alma 7:11-12). Using an example which now seems prophetic given his own recent diagnosis of a myeloproliferative disorder, Elder Maxwell said that the only way Christ could know of "the suffering of a leukemia patient was to actually suffer the physical pains of leukemia."[4]

If not an explanation of suffering, such a concept is a consolation. It gives us the realization that our elder brother knows our aches, pains, fever, paralysis, and psychoses. With such a concept, the sufferings of our flesh take on a divine quality; we find the sufferings of the natural man "atoned" even upon the cross.

The Human Brain

What then remains in our celebration of the natural man as we "embrace" the flesh? Besides an appreciation of our body's origin and the insults our bodies endure, we Mormons must also develop a theology of mind or, perhaps more appropriately, of brain. If indeed the spiritual and the physical are "intertwined," then nowhere else are they more tightly bound than in the human brain. If indeed we have a soul, it most assuredly is in intimate communication, if not identity, with the billions of neurons and glial cells which make up the human central nervous system.

Aristotle, considered the father of biology, thought the brain's principal function was to cool the blood. From that humble beginning, the brain has reached its preeminence as the organ of thought, emotion and mood, volition, planning, memory, and as the primary sex organ. It was easy, in years past, for religions to separate the physical from the spiritual, the

4. Address by Elder Neal A. Maxwell to a combined conference of missionaries from the Japan Tokyo North and Tokyo South missions, Tokyo, Japan, 19 Nov. 1984; notes in my possession.

corruptible from the divine. We acted, it was explained, because we have a soul which does the thinking, the sinning, and the supplicating.

But by observing the human condition, and through advances in biochemistry as well as anatomic and functional neuroimaging, modern neuroscience has come to the simple conclusion that, in the words of John Searle, "brains cause minds."[5] Now we learn that our hypothalamus controls appetite, our medulla regulates sleep, our parietal lobe processes spatial information. Slice strategically into the frontal cortex, as in the frequently performed lobotomy operation of the 1950s, and a violent person is reduced to a docile child with little desire, little personality. Decrease the dopaminergic output in the substantia nigra and a person shuffles in a Parkinsonian gait. If any of the multitude of neurotransmitters which are released at synaptic endings of neurons are disturbed, one sees such clinical syndromes as depression, mania, and epilepsy.

But if brains cause minds, do they also cause souls? In this twentieth century, has brain become soul? Certainly neuroscientists do not search for the soul hidden in the pineal gland of cadavers, as Descartes reportedly did. We are therefore left with the fundamental question of whether our "spiritual" experiences on this earth (i.e., prayer, revelation, etc.) result from electrochemical reactions going on in our brain. Do our spiritual yearnings and the "burning of our bosom" originate in a three-pound grayish-blue organ in our skull? How does our eternal intelligence differ from the mechanics of billions of neurons? The answers to these questions will probably have to wait until we have crossed the veil, but advances in neuroscience have forced these questions upon us. Our very identity is at stake. We may be spirit children, but we seem to be no less cerebral children of our heavenly father.

We also have difficulty acknowledging the fragility of our thinking organ; its proximity to chaos. For a year prior to attending medical school, I worked as an orderly in a nursing home. I would assist older men, suffering the ravages of Alzheimer's disease, cerebrovascular disease, or other forms of senility, with their daily routine: bathing, toileting, eating. One wing was devoted entirely to Alzheimer patients. It was with some trepidation that I went to work in that wing. There noble yet confused elderly men and women shuffled through the corridors or rocked back and forth with vacant eyes. The neurofibrillary tangles and senile plaques which had infiltrated the frontal lobes of their brains had, by slow degrees, robbed them of their intelligence, memory, and personality. (One patient, Harvey, an obviously devout Mormon in his day, would spend hours in his wheelchair praying over and over. If it is true that a

5. John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 39.

prayer offered to God brings blessings on our heads, then I am sure Harvey, long since passed on, has inherited worlds unnumbered.) Such a spectacle, brains short-circuited and non-functional, is difficult to watch. And it is more difficult to accept the fact that one day we too may lose our neurological connection with the world. As a former anatomy instructor succinctly put it, "We wish to be angels, not made out of meat."

It is this very fragility which begs the question of our free agency. A staple of Mormonism is the right of humankind to choose here on earth. If our brain, and thus our behavior, is so sensitive to injury, medications, disease, even genetics, are we truly free to act? Are there neurological conditions in which choice is taken from us?

A cursory review of the neurological diseases of man yields many examples of free agency denied. Certainly my oldest brother is an example of a divestment of free agency. He suffers from one of the most horrific diseases known: schizophrenia. For over a dozen years, he has been a victim of a disease that has robbed him of a meaningful connection with reality and with those who love him. His thoughts are marred by delusional concepts. He is incapable of most basic social interactions. His disease is controlled, only marginally, by medications which adjust the levels of certain neurotransmitters in his brain. This brain disease stares free agency in the face. It appears totally incongruous with the Plan of Salvation. It is flesh in complete dominance over any concept of spirituality. Thus, for some, choices are necessarily limited here on this world. How a benevolent creator will judge these spirit children, whose brains prevent the complete exercise of free agency, is a troubling question.

But when our brains *are* functioning, unimpaired by disease, what a marvelous medium we have to interact with our world. Our capacity to create, to serve, and to learn seems unlimited. By estimating the number of synaptic connections neurons have with each other in the human brain, the late scientist and astronomer Carl Sagan estimated the potential mental "states" of the human mind as 2 raised to 10^{13} or 2 times itself ten trillion times. This, he explains, is "an unimaginably large number, far greater, for example, than the total number of elementary particles ... in the universe."[6] It is clear that through our brain we have the potential to glance into the eternities before us, and beyond.

Conclusion

After a long year of gross anatomy, it is not uncommon for first-year medical students to have a non-denominational ceremony in which they thank the people who donated their bodies to medicine. In hushed rever-

6. Carl Sagan, *The Dragons of Eden* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 43.

ence they light candles or recite a poem with the shrouded cadavers before them in the anatomy lab. It is a sacrament, evidence of the powerful impact the dialogue between student and natural man has been.

We are "made of meat." Like a pungent broth of decaying matter, so too will we at the appropriate time slowly fly apart into the soup from which we came. But more than simply carbon-based creatures that evolved over millions of years, we have, within us, the spark of the divine. How this spark interacts with our physical form is a challenging question. It is perhaps that spark which lifts us above the suffering we encounter in the flesh and separates us from other animals.

Although Mormonism is not immune from the tendency to shy away from celebrating our natural state, I think it has shown in the past an unusual, even heretical elevation of the natural man: We are told that physical matter cannot be created, it is organized. Joseph Smith preached that we can eternally progress, and introduced the Word of Wisdom to protect and nourish our bodies. We are told that we will resurrect as physical beings. And the most radical, beautiful teaching of all: God has a body "of flesh and bones." Indeed, though we are usually reticent to proclaim the wonders of *being* a body (not just *having* one), Mormonism is divinely poised, through its unique teachings, to embrace the flesh. By so doing, we are only embracing God.