

# THE **NAKED** PEOPLE IN YOUR IPOD

by Paul Malan

The first time you saw them, by accident, you were too young to feel embarrassed. I answered every question you asked, and hoped you couldn't tell I was embarrassed. We've both grown up since then and talked a lot about them, hoping to make the naked people in your iPod just another thing in your world, like jealousy in school, blood in video games, and sugar in soda.



But you're older now, more likely to find them on purpose, and less likely to talk to me about them when you do. So while I still have your attention, before you're too old to hug me in front of your friends, let's talk some more about pornography.

But first, let's talk about bacon.

## **Mmmm... Bacon**

Every day, you feel hungry. It isn't something you choose, it's just part of being alive. It's physiology.

When you feel hungry, you get to choose what to do about it. You could skip a meal, fry up some bacon, or steal a Snickers bar from the corner store. That is morality.

Since you're being raised Mormon, you probably wouldn't order coffee with your breakfast. (We aren't alone: If we were Jewish, you might never taste a cheeseburger.) Every culture has shared values that reinforce its identity. As a shortcut, let's call this religion.

## **Mmmm... Porn**

Just like your appetite reacts to the smell of cooking bacon,

evolution wired clever primates, like you and me, to react to sexual stories, pictures, and videos. It's that simple. That's pretty much the only reason porn is even a thing.

But for a lot of people, porn isn't just a thing—it's a Very Scary Thing. In our culture, a lot of those people spend their Sunday afternoons in the same building we do. Don't make too much of

this—I think religions do some things really well. But conservative religions, like ours, suck at porn.

"Pornography is any picture or narrative that feeds the carnal man within."

- Elder Tad Callister, LDS general authority

Elder Callister just told you, and your friends, and your youth group leaders, that anything that turns you on is pornographic. Porn is a problem, and being aroused is porn. His message? Arousal is a problem.

Like too many people, he's confusing morality and physiology. Would it make sense to apply the same logic to your appetite? Hunger is a problem. You won't have a healthy relationship with food if you believe that.

Getting turned on is not a problem. Getting turned on is physiology. What we choose to do about being turned on is morality. Whether our choices align with our cultural values is religion. If you can keep these three ideas straight, pornography (and sexuality in general) becomes a lot less complicated.

## What Pornography Is

I don't love the way our conservative culture talks about porn, but I am certainly not advocating for it. There are plenty of practical reasons you might choose to avoid porn. The porn industry tends to exploit its performers. It depicts women, in particular, as mere objects for sexual gratification. It distorts reality and wastes time.

But when people apply the label "pornography" to anything that excites any person, we give up the ability to talk about it in a meaningful way. If your youth group leader thinks bare shoulders and bikinis at the beach are pornographic, you're going to get confused. When I talk to you about pornography, I mean pictures and videos of sex. I mean the business of exploiting our hardwired response to sexuality—producing pictures and videos that reduce sexual relationships to a series of camera-friendly stunts.

## Mark Wahlberg Fails Driver's Education

In the 2003 movie *The Italian Job*, Mark Wahlberg and his friends race Mini Coopers across a crowded city, darting in and out of traffic, down concrete steps into subway tunnels, even jumping their cars out of a tunnel into the Los Angeles River.

You're not old enough to drive, but you've been riding in cars since you were two days old, so you understand the fantasy of a great car chase movie. It's fun to imagine, but you know it isn't what driving in a crowded city is really like.

You don't have that kind of context when you watch pornography. You don't have any way of understanding if what you're watching is what healthy sexual relationships are really like or if it's the sexual equivalent of a Mini Cooper racing through a subway station. Ideally, our culture would help you gain that perspective, but porn makes most of us so uncomfortable we end up making it harder, not easier, for you to understand.

"Hey, Mom," you might say. "I watched a movie last night. Would it really work to drive a car in the subway?"

That's an easy question to ask. How about this one?

"Hey, Mom, I watched some porn last night. Does sex really end like that?"

Not such an easy question. How come?

## Pornography Is Not the Enemy

Sexuality makes everyone anxious—there's a lot of natural curiosity, physical motivation, and cultural shame. We don't usually ask our parents questions about porn because we're ashamed of what we know and confused by what we don't.

Too often, people who condemn pornography rely on fear to motivate us. They call pornography "the new drug" and frame it as if it were more damaging than alcoholism and more addictive than heroin. They mean well, but their message ("Looking at porn dooms you to a life of crippling addiction and miserable loneliness!") is unproductive. It gives pornography more power than it needs to have.

They have made pornography the enemy—the representation of everything "wrong" about human sexuality. If you've seen it, you're damaged goods. If you didn't hate seeing it, you might be an addict already. You should feel terrible.

But pornography is not the enemy. Shame is the enemy. Shame is fear, personalized: If they knew this about me, they would reject me. Fear feeds shame, and shame feeds pornography.

## Shame On Us

By the way, don't confuse shame and guilt. Guilt is healthy—it says "Something I did is not ok." Shame is destructive—it says "I am not ok."

When things don't feel ok inside, we try to replace the bad feeling with something else. Some psychologists call this self-soothing, and we all do it. Some people run five miles. Some people eat a



None of the world's happiest drivers learned about driving by watching car chase movies. I promise.

pint of ice cream or watch Netflix for hours. Some people drink wine, or shop, or stare at their cell phone, or sleep, or take drugs, or read, or play video games. And some people look at porn.

Most of the time, a five-mile run is just a five-mile run and ice cream is just ice cream. But when we're trying to escape inner turmoil, the motivation a person feels to escape into pornography is not much different from the motivation her friend feels to escape into a pint of ice cream, which isn't much different from his neighbor's motivation to escape into a 5-mile run.

We humans have a remarkably counterproductive habit of trying to numb shame by going back to the thing that triggered our shame. If I'm feeling bad about myself for looking at porn, I'm more likely to bury the feeling by looking for more porn. It can create an unhealthy cycle that acts like addiction.

### **The Shortcut to Wisdom**

There is nothing wrong with self soothing—in fact, it's an important part of mental health. So how can we learn to do it well? My suggestion is going to seem familiar, because it starts with the same two words I tell you all the time: Ask why.

Why are you reaching for that ice cream? Why are you staring at your phone instead of interacting with the real world? Why are you about to go incognito in your web browser?

If you have the courage to follow your answers to their root, they can help you understand what you're really after. Sometimes I eat ice cream because I like ice cream, and sometimes I eat ice cream because I feel like I was a lousy parent that day.

That doesn't have to mean I shouldn't eat ice cream. It isn't a matter of "should" or "shouldn't"—it's simply a matter of awareness. It isn't going to kill me to eat a pint of ice cream after a hard day, but it isn't going to teach me anything, either, unless I'm aware of why I'm eating it.

Once I'm aware, I get to make a choice. I can choose to respond to life on purpose instead of reacting to life out of habit.

Try it. Not as a way of talking yourself out of anything—just as a way of practicing awareness. Next time you catch yourself killing time on your phone, or looking for porn, or chasing some other escape that feels heavy, ask why.

Sometimes, you'll realize you're looking for porn because you're hiding from a negative emotion like shame or embarrassment or frustration. When you realize that, ask yourself if porn is going to make it better or worse.

Other times, you're going to realize you're just looking for porn because you're horny. (Sorry. My dad used the word "horny" one time and I nearly died from embarrassment.) There's nothing

too complicated about that motivation, but it does still present a moral choice.

If you found out your favorite bakery was dumping harmful chemicals into a community park, what would you do? The more donuts they sell, the more damage they do to your community. Would you still buy their donuts? (What if you waited until the end of the day when they give away donuts that didn't sell? Would it feel like you weren't part of the problem because no money changed hands?)

It's a sloppy comparison, I know, but there are real downsides to pornography as a business. Whether we pay for it or not, watching porn creates demand in the market and perpetuates some pretty damaging dynamics. While you're deciding if porn aligns with your moral compass, do some research about the way it impacts the people who work in the business.

### **Just Another Thing In Your World**

Our conservative culture tries to make it scarier than it needs to be, but ultimately porn is just another thing in your world. I know you're going to bump into it from time to time, and I can't tell you the right way to blend your physiology, morality, and religion. It's something you get to decide for yourself. Sometimes you'll handle it well, and sometimes you'll act in ways that don't line up with who you are. When that happens, learn from the guilt, but don't buy in to the shame.

You are a clever primate, and you are wired to get turned on by porn. That's simple physiology. But that doesn't mean porn will make your world a better place, and it doesn't mean porn will help you feel connected to others, and that's really what we're all here to do.

## **CONNECT ONLINE FOR MORE RESOURCES**

I used to add a disclaimer to this letter: I'm just a guy with five kids. No fancy degrees or certifications. Certainly not an expert. But as the letter spread around the world I found myself connecting with experts who actually do have fancy degrees and certifications, and each of them told me the same thing:

Our children don't need us to be experts. Our children need need us to show up and have real conversations – especially when we aren't sure what to say.

Find me online at [malan.org/porn](http://malan.org/porn) and I'll connect you with the people and books and ideas that have helped me show up for my kids.