



We know of our two-fold nature, how we are body and spirit, mind and matter, heart and soul. Is there a religion that hasn't identified this, that has neglected to invent myths to explain it? Our finest selves exist in that untouchable realm of emotion, inspiration, and spirit. It is the home of philosophy and poetry and love. In that universe time does not exist, or exists only as a breeze exists over the ocean, a thin phenomenon of little importance.

The intangible world of spirit sits in contrast to our material world, where gravity operates and chemical forces play out their predictable reactions. As those same religions know, we are rooted here, bound to our dancing, shuffling, weary bodies. We can dream ourselves across the heavens, but return to find ourselves curled in a chair with a cramp in our neck. We love in ways immeasurable, but are left with nothing more vast than a kiss to carry the wonder of it. Locked in the material world, we find in it vibrations from that other universe, tokens that connect us with our largest selves.

We are surrounded by objects, the furniture of our material world. It is made of substance—of wood and stone and fiber—and shares at least half of our reality. We are not wood or stone, but further down, we are all molecules of this and that, electrons spinning with the fundamental energy of life.

Objects surround us, as close as our clothing and as distant as public monuments. What is the language of these things? By what codes do they connect with us, embrace us, refute us, and in the end, inform us? This we could call the syntax of objects, the meaning that lies in their arrangement; the power of our relationship to each other.



What is my first memory of the object-filled world? I can tell myself of the experience of birth, when I was forced through a too-small space, the limits of my physical size first pushed upon me. It probably hurt, so I learned of pain, learned that when I bump up against the physical world, it pushes back. I do not remember this, but that first encounter might have left a memory.

I was then wrapped in a blanket, swabbed with water, lifted by hands, all events that excited the nerves in my waterlogged skin, awakening senses that haven't slept since. I do not remember that, but it must have happened. I went home, a ride in a car. I was lifted, turned, laid into a crib, dressed, and bathed; all events that continued my education of the material world, helping me define my place in it.

By the time my first genuine memory shows up, my understanding of the world was probably well advanced, or at least far along the path that marks our understanding of the world. Who is to say if we are ever far advanced? How much is there to the world of objects that we will never understand?

By the time I was two I must have known the edges of my own body and been able to discern the physical

beings of others. I could tell, if not name, the difference between my foot and my hand, my mother and my father, and the floor from the wall. I would have learned by then that it hurt when I fell down, and that it hurt less when I fell on grass than pavement. In an unguarded moment, I might have learned about hot, touching a radiator or a pan just from the oven. I discovered again that the material world bumps back, sometimes harder than others.

I would know, without having words to describe it, a continuum of interaction. I would know that some things felt better than others; it was more pleasant to be warm than cold, fed than hungry, and so on. I would know that I liked to be sometimes horizontal, sometimes vertical, that there was a time for keeping my eyes open and a time for closing them. Like all children, I must have once thought that when I closed my eyes, the world disappeared. I couldn't have proven it then, and I can't prove it now, but after so many trials, always finding things pretty much as I left them when I closed my eyes, I'm willing to pretend that the universe does not dissolve into empty space and reconstruct itself when I awaken.

Of course I could be wrong about this.



Somewhere in my early childhood I took some responsibility for adding to the material world, or at least manipulating it in some way. After a couple years of being lifted and placed, fed and bathed, handed objects that I would examine and toss away, one day I made an object myself.

Was it a lump of Play-Doh, or a crayon that first came into my hand? It was a momentous day; pivotal, life-changing, and again, one I do not remember. I made a gesture, nerve impulses triggering muscle contractions that jerked a finger or swung an arm, to make my mark upon the world; my first creative addition to the world of objects. It was the most important piece I ever made. It is gone now, unremembered.

As my understanding of the world of objects grew, I found a forest of distinctions. They still come to me, and there must be many more I do not perceive. Objects are large and small, hard and soft, mine and not mine. They have different colors, tastes, and smells. Some roll and bounce and move by themselves. Others are still: are they sleeping or dead?

I pick my nose, wiggle my teeth, and probe every sort of object I can. What does it feel like inside the dog's ears? How long can I hold my head under the bath water, and why shouldn't I put my hand in the toilet? I learn, through determined and anxious effort, to control the small muscles that will improve my ability to work with objects. I hold a cup, lift a spoon, and with furrowed brow eventually find the way to push a pencil with some control.

A new class of objects, pencils and markers and crayons, come into my reach. I work on vast sheets of coarse-surfaced paper the color of oatmeal. I discover symbols, ideas in my head that work like words to communicate with the people around me. See, that's

a house, I say, and here is the door. They do not see it, but it doesn't matter. It's a door anyway. Let them figure it out.

I love these objects—the greasy feel of the crayon when I strip off the paper, and the way it tastes when I rub it on my teeth, not sweet, but like a drawing. The fat black pencils are long, full of drawings, and as blunt as a fable. I wish I had one in my hand right now.

