

## STRIPPED NAKED:

### On giving up privacy and independence

I was stunned a couple weeks ago when I noticed a large group of women huddled around Shirley in Fellowship Hall after the morning church service. The previous day Shirley had come to my apartment to help me take a shower and get dressed. She then volunteered to set up a schedule of ladies from the church to rotate coming to help me on Saturday mornings. She named five others besides herself that she was considering, some of whom were already helping me in the bathroom at church. Feeling comfortable with all of them, I happily gave consent to the plan.

As I looked over the growing number of women conferring with Shirley that morning I noticed several that I did not know well and one whose name I could not recall. "My goodness!" I thought. "I'm going to end up stripped naked in front of all the ladies of the church!" I had to process quickly whether I would be willing to do this.

Why would all these women be eager to help me in such a personal way, I wondered. And then I felt that I knew. I had been attending the church regularly for over three years and during that time I had been very open with the members of the congregation. From the pulpit, in Bible classes, in Sunday School and in personal contacts I had bared to them my soul and spirit. They really knew me, even if I did not know all of them, and they wanted to do what they could. God bless them! Humbled, I decided to accept their help, to let the details up to Shirley, and to be thankful.

That day my mind began to flood with thoughts old and new about nakedness, privacy and independence, some of which follows.

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Adam and Eve were both naked and they felt no shame. There was no reason to be ashamed, for they were innocent. Guilt brings shame, as they quickly discovered. As soon as they ate fruit from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the eyes of both of them were opened, and there they were: naked and ashamed! Feeling a strong urge to cover up, they sewed fig leaves together and made clothing for themselves. Now they were hidden from each other in more ways than physically. Privacy had been introduced, a hindrance to unity and openness.

While the fig leaves covered parts of their bodies from the eyes of each other, both Adam and Eve knew they were still naked in God's sight. Hence they hid among the trees of the garden when they heard God approaching. I like the honest answer that Adam blurted out when God asked him where he was: *"I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."* Spiritual nakedness is worse than physical nakedness and there is nothing we can do about it – except admit our condition to God and accept his remedy, as our first parents did.

God provided clothing to cover Adam and Eve's physical and spiritual nakedness, as recorded in Genesis 3:21 – *"The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them."* I wonder if Adam and Eve, back in right relationship with God again, lost their shame at this point? Did they continue to wear clothing? Is physical nakedness sinful?

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Which brings us to Noah's story. No, not the one about the flood; the one about his moral failure, found in Genesis 9:20-27. Some people take from this sad story the thought that exposing our

bodies to someone else's view is sinful or that seeing another's naked body, even accidentally, is wrong. I can't believe that in the time when Noah and his sons lived there was enough privacy surrounding bathing and eliminating that the sons had never seen their father's body before. What I see here is an episode of Noah's moral and spiritual nakedness, perhaps symbolized by his being uncovered physically.

None of this would have happened if Noah had not been drunk. Ham found his father in this condition and did something to him (v. 24). I don't know what it was but it seems to me it was more than getting a glimpse of his father's nakedness and then telling his brothers – even in a joking manner – about it. Shem and Japheth carefully covered their father's shameful condition without seeing it, thanks to their brother's report.

When Noah awoke from his drunken stupor and found out what Ham had “done to him” he reacted in a very harsh way rather than taking responsibility for his part in the event: he cursed Ham's son, Canaan. Many people believe that God concurred with Noah's curse. Would Noah's curse override God's blessing on each of Noah's sons (Genesis 9:1)? What if God validated all the hurtful things that we have blurted out in anger? I think Noah's rash words just show the depth of his distress over the whole incident.

Why was this story recorded in the Bible for everyone to read? Maybe so that we will not revere the wrong person. Only Jesus lived a perfect life. All the rest of us fall short of the glory of God, and God wants us to know that.

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In my childhood and youth I think I had a normal amount of modesty – and curiosity – about my own and other people's nakedness. I had no problem with the group showers after gym class in school, nor with the communal bathrooms in college. It seemed normal, though not always pleasant, to uncover my body in the presence of doctors and nurses. I do remember being shocked when I had my appendix removed at age fifteen to find that one of my main nurses was a handsome young man! Of necessity I lost some of my inhibitions during those few days in the hospital.

In raising our children I kept my body private from them except when I was nursing babies. In 1991 Leo and I were in California visiting our son and daughter-in-law, Paul and Marita, when I came down with an incapacitating lower back pain. Marita sent the men to the drug store for some ointment which she then massaged into my bare back. “Don't be embarrassed,” she said. “I'm not,” I replied, as I let her healing hands do their work. And that was all – until February 15, 2003.

That was the day I broke my hip. My daughter Marty was with me in the emergency room when the nurse removed my clothing. My breasts are both scarred, one from a lumpectomy, the other from a biopsy that was benign. “Did you get a look at my chest?” I asked Marty. When she answered in the affirmative I said, “Good! Now that's over.” And freedom is what I felt.

After that things changed rapidly. I knew I had broken my hip because I had an underlying disease, undiagnosed up to then. My children wanted to start taking me to my doctors' appointments, even going with me into the offices! David was the first to do so, and it certainly felt different. For the most part, I had been going alone to see my doctors from about the age of 12. Was I now to have my privacy and independence taken from me? Knowing their motives were good, I made my decision: I would give up both my privacy and independence and would accept their help – with gratitude! I figured what you willingly give up cannot be taken from you. The bonus has been a growing intimacy with my sons and daughters and their spouses. They have been there while I have undergone some unpleasant, painful tests and have also heard for themselves my first reactions to doctor's reports.

The witnesses spread the news to their siblings, a practice I approve.

For example, George was with me in the summer of 2003 when my new neurologist said he thought I had Primary Lateral Sclerosis (PLS), a progressive crippling illness centered in the brain. He said the disease usually progresses slowly, so I asked him about driving. He said that he would want me to take a specialized driving test to see if it were safe for me to drive. A few minutes later I told George that I would never take that test. "If my neurologist cannot say that it is safe for me to drive, then I will never drive again," I said. On the way from the doctor's office to the bathroom in the lobby, I had a chance to evaluate the changes entering my life and to mourn my losses. Exiting the bathroom I said to George, "It's all right." "How could you process all that – a progressive disease and no more driving – in just ten minutes?" he asked incredulously. My reply: "George, it was not just ten minutes. It was a lifetime and ten minutes." That statement has given me much profitable meditation since then, and I never would have said or even thought of it had not George been with me.

That same summer I had surgery that would hopefully correct some urinary incontinence that I was experiencing. Janet took me to my urologist's office shortly thereafter so he could check the incisions just above my pubic bone. She came into the office with me, intending to leave when the doctor arrived. But when he came into the room, he blocked the exit! There was nothing she could do but remain. Oh, well, I thought as I prepared for the exam, Janet will do exactly what I would do if our positions were reversed: she will not look. My doctor was so pleased with his work that he just had to let someone see it. "Come here and take a look," he beckoned to Janet. "Isn't this good work?" She agreed that those were indeed fine looking incisions. In the restaurant after the appointment Janet mentioned that she didn't have the opportunity to leave the room when she wanted to. "I know," I said. "You didn't even have the opportunity not to look!" And we both laughed.

At that time I began getting help from the Visiting Nurse Association, including a home health aide who helped me take showers. Here I was helped by a memory of my parents in a similar situation. Perhaps six years prior to my experience, we got a health aide to help Dad bathe. Mom said to me, "He don't mind getting undressed in front of her." Neither did I, Dad.

The urologist's surgery did not work and I began to need more help in the bathroom. One day Janet was with me and I was in a pensive mood. Thinking of my two daughters (MaryBeth and Marty), and my three daughters-in-law (Janet, Dana and Marita), I said to Janet, "You know, I would strip naked in front of any of the five of you, and I mean that as a compliment to our relationships." That was a good feeling and it certainly showed a change in me – a positive change!

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Last week I was standing naked before a friend of mine, preparing for a shower, when I said to her, "Do you know what surprises me, Vallie? I do not feel the least bit immodest being undressed in your presence." One can be completely (or partially) naked and still be modest. Motive surely plays a role in determining whether the exposed body is shameful or not. I needed help and so there I was – naked and not ashamed – just like the newly created Adam and Eve.

Modesty can actually be understood in a way that brings bondage, not freedom. My father had a sister who was developmentally handicapped. Aunt Sara spent her days in a wheelchair, unable to speak clearly and needing much personal care. Grandma, who gladly tended to her daughter's needs, taught her that her father must never see her naked body, as that would be shameful. But when Sara was about 50, Grandma died. I was in on the family conference Grandpa called to help him decide what to do. "If I keep her at home I'll have to wash her," he said. "Do that," I replied. When he wondered what people might think, I became indignant: "If anyone criticizes you, shame on

them!” Grandpa kept his daughter home for over a year until he could no longer handle the job. I can only imagine how traumatic the first bath was for both of them, all because of misunderstanding modesty.

A middle aged man was talking with me about the care he had to give to his mother, who was suffering from dementia. “I even have to give her showers,” he said, pausing as if to let me process that information. He continued: “And the only way I can get her into the shower is to get in with her.” He obviously found relief when I commended him for being willing to serve his mother to that extent. Modesty and nakedness are not mutually exclusive terms.

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I enjoy hearing music in which one composer takes a theme from another composer and writes a series of embellishments for the tune. “Variations on a Theme by \_\_\_\_\_,” these compositions are usually called. No matter how complicated the variation, you can still hear the original theme underneath. For years I have been thinking that the human body is like this. We are all just variations on a theme by God. Perhaps I should say “themes,” but other than the reproductive organs, even males and females are quite similar in body form and bodily functions.

My own body shows signs of ageing: wrinkles here, bulges there, scars everywhere. Yet I doubt that anyone has been completely shocked upon seeing my body; nor should I be upon seeing someone else’s. We have been wonderfully made by God. May we not let a rigid sense of modesty and shame keep us from serving others or allowing others to serve us even in the most intimate of ways. We wouldn’t want to miss the blessing that giving and receiving such service brings!

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I never saw my mother naked, until three years ago when Mom was 92. At the time she was living in the dementia unit of a church Home in Pennsylvania. I had come from New York to spend a few days with her and was now in her room. Mom went into the bathroom and shortly returned with her skirt held up around her waist and her diaper and underpants around her knees. “Ferhoodled!” she said plaintively. Mom spoke very little in those days, but I recognized that word from my childhood. It was Pennsylvania Dutch for “all mixed up” and was so appropriate for Mom at that moment. I was both flustered and embarrassed, at the same time thinking “Mom is as innocent as a two year old who can’t quite figure out how to get her clothes back on after a bathroom trip.”

“Do you want me to get someone to change your diaper?” I asked Mom. She answered “No!” “Do you want me to change it?” “Yes!” I got a clean diaper from her cupboard, removed the used one and, standing behind her, performed the task that she had done for me many times long years ago: I changed my mother’s diaper. In those few minutes I lost my embarrassment and my heart welled up with tenderness. What a privilege to have served Mom this way!

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*“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2, emphasis mine).*

What was the shame of the cross that Jesus scorned? Until recently I assumed that part of the shame was that he hung naked on the cross. I still believe that he was unclothed during his crucifixion (soldiers gambled for his undergarment), but where would I get the idea that he was

ashamed to have people see his naked body? From my background? From Psalm 22:17? (Surely people would have found more to stare and gloat over than his nakedness: his “helplessness,” for example.)

I think the shame of the cross for Jesus was the contamination he felt when he had the sins of the whole world – including mine and yours – placed upon him. He was completely innocent, yet at one point he became sin (or a sin offering) for us. Did our sins anger and disgust his pure soul? I can imagine that they did.

And then Jesus, already bare of body, bared his soul for all to see when he – the Living Water – said he was thirsty and when he cried out, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* So many of us, even those able to bare their bodies without embarrassment when necessary, want to keep our souls hidden. We are so private that others cannot really get to know us. It’s not too late for us to change. For the sake of the gospel and the Kingdom of God, let’s be transparent before others – just as Jesus was.

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The Teacher in Ecclesiastes says in chapter three that there is a time for everything and a season for every activity. Then he gives a list of examples, such as: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to keep and a time to throw away. I don’t believe the Teacher meant to imply that his list was complete. Occasionally I have looked at situations using this familiar pattern and I want to do so now. With all I have said about nakedness and transparency I do believe that there is

a time for independence and a time for dependence,  
a time for privacy and a time for full disclosure,  
a time to cover up and a time to strip naked, etc.

God designed us to be dependent on our Creator and to be interdependent with others. A young child will often fight for the right to “do it myself.” Being self-sufficient then becomes a habit that is hard for some to give up as they age and/or become incapacitated. God’s grace is available to help us become good receivers as well as good givers as we live in community with each other.

The gospels record that Jesus was not always open and available. There is a time for everything. Sometimes he would freely talk and other times he kept silent. So often surrounded by crowds, he also sought times to be alone. He needed privacy to talk with his Father, to meditate, to rest. He kept within himself much that he would have revealed, had he found those who would receive his message. His inner life was deep and rich; he could not share all the richness even with his closest friends. Is it the same with you? May God help us to recognize what “time” it is and to live accordingly.

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The doorbell rings around 9:30 on Saturday mornings. The door opens and one or two of my friends from church enter, ready to do my bidding. As they serve me physically we talk, and in this way I am getting to know them as they know me. Everybody benefits and God is glorified. We are behaving as loving family members, just as God intended.