

“Being Comfortable in Our Own Skins: Treasuring Our Soul’s Address” by Keith

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The 6th Sunday After Pentecost

I’m often self-critical and judgmental about focusing on issues of Body and feel that they don’t measure up to other weighty and important topics; that is particularly true in light of Kate Cudlipp’s serious injuries yesterday. Kate was my spiritual guide and an important confidante during a lot of vital years on my body journey; I am going to try to carry on and fervently pray that she is with us in spirit now and soon will be again in body. Her sudden injuries certainly emphasize the fragility of our bodies and also the extent to which I/we so often take our bodies for granted.

INTRODUCTION

With our current theme and all the bare figures on the altar, I come to celebrate Body by focusing on our physical bodies. Not the church body, or spiritual bodies, or other ethereal

concepts, but our actual flesh and blood bodies. At Seekers, we purport to appreciate and honor our bodies, and (I'm sure) do not intend to be repressed about our bodies. I am here to claim that and put some flesh onto those notions.

It's easy to agree in the abstract that bodies are good, but I'm not here to talk about hypothetical bodies, but real bodies – yours and mine. And don't we all know how easy it is to be critical of our own bodies and wish that we were different in some way...or in many ways. I want to encourage us to love ourselves, and each other, just as we are. There is beauty in each of us, just as we are, for our bodies are God-given and good.

Preparing this sermon has been helpful to try to put words around the importance of Body and nudity in my life and my previously unarticulated experience. An important part of my journey is realizing that I can claim this as part of my Christian faith journey, even if different from others' journeys.

A TOUCH OF THEOLOGY

But I may be getting ahead of myself. So let's back up a bit...to Genesis. According to the creation story, we were created "in the image of God" and were "naked" but "felt no shame." God saw all that God made and that it was "very good" (Genesis 1:27, 2:25, 1:31). I take from this that being naked is or can be pure and innocent, as when God first created us.

And of course the central tenets of Christianity are the very act of God becoming a human body, only to die and be

resurrected, again as body.

As for today's lectionary, if forced I could connect to Buried Treasure or even Rachel being "lovely in form and beautiful" – but I decided to leave it alone!

There's more pro-body theology I could get into – and it is offset by a whole lot of pretty heavy anti-body scripture that scholars can – and have – argued about over the centuries. But since I am here to advocate more emphasis on Body, it would be a bit ironic for the discourse to center on complex Heady arguments. In fact, I came across a number of sermons on this topic on the web – they were all highly intellectualized, with no mention of actual experience of being Body. I found that funny.

But I probably shouldn't laugh. God knows that I spent decades "in my Head" – and it has taken me a great deal of effort to expand beyond being in my Head to also focus on being in my Body. This has been an important part of my life's journey and spiritual journey. Being more balanced makes me feel much more whole and complete, more in touch with my feelings and able to feel more empathy towards others.

So let me turn to my experience of shifting to Body.

"HAPPINESS IS NO TAN LINES"

To put it straight out – my truth is that I love being naked in nature. It makes me feel free and whole and close to God in

a way that nothing else does. I don't know why, but it brings me joy. I can't argue with those who might think it seems silly. But it's as real as anything I know. Clothed even in a minimal way, I feel a part of society and constrained by its strictures. Naked in nature I feel like I am a seamless part of creation and feel close to the Creator.

I have loved skinny-dipping all my life – my beloved grandfather and I used to skinny-dip in ponds on his farm from when I was little. And Japanese ofuros – public baths – often have outdoor gardens connected to the baths where one can walk naked to have the cool air after the hot bath, often overlooking the beauty of nature or a panorama of the city.

A notable shift occurred for me in 2002, when Brenda and I planned a trip to Greece and Turkey at the height of summer for our 25th wedding anniversary. I made a conscious decision to shift my perspective and befriend the sun. Prior to that, there were many years when I was so busy working and so in my head that I would not be out enough to need any sunscreen or get a mosquito bite over the entire summer.

But that summer I shifted and came to love the sun and I realized how much being naked outdoors makes me feel whole. From there, I came to love heavy rain on my bare skin, which makes me feel alive. More recently I found that being naked with mud between my toes makes me feel intensely close to the Earth and closer to life. So where I used to be fastidious about things like putting on shoes to walk on the dirty concrete floor of our garage, I now go barefoot without minding a bit. This shift towards nature has also impacted my spiritual life.

One of my favorite things now is to meditate in the late afternoon sunshine on the edge of the reservoir-lake where I regularly kayak, with birdsong all around, even with sweat running down me from the heat. One thing that seems very remarkable to me is that in the parking lot and nearby where I put in my kayak I routinely get bit by mosquitoes, but a mile or so up the lake where I land on the bank at the edge of the woods I have never gotten bitten in many, many visits. I can imagine more scientific explanations, but it feels to me like when I'm clothed in the parking lot I'm an intruder in nature, but when I'm not clothed on the other end I've shifted to the natural side and am welcomed as part of nature with only some curious ants checking me out.

Of course, being a part of nature this way around here doesn't work as well in the wintertime, which I have been pleased to remedy by installing an old hot tub behind our house last winter, which allows me to be outdoors and look up at the trees all year 'round. I've marveled how the stars through the bare trees this winter were replaced by fireflies against the leafy canopy this summer. Being in my hot tub, generally both morning and night, helps to slow me down. One of the things that sold me on this approach was hearing how Jackie prays in her hot tub. Now, I do too.

COMMUNITY

While much of my time naked in nature is by myself, it is also wonderful to be with others. Camping often offers a dose of that for me. But I've got to say there is something very special about nude beaches.

The sense of community is one thing I find remarkable on nude beaches. Despite the fact that people are more exposed, they actually talk to each other much more and help each other in ways that don't happen on regular "textile" beaches. The foremost clothing optional beach on the East Coast is at Sandy Hook at the northern tip of New Jersey, a beautiful and legal nude beach in a federal park that draws a thousand people on a nice summer day. I was by myself the first time I went to Sandy Hook years ago and was struggling to put sunscreen on my back when a couple of younger women behind me offered to help. Not any sort of come on, just a normal interaction within the community that I have experienced on nude beaches around the country, where everyone shares the common element of being outside mainstream society there. And, while I felt I belonged from the beginning and all are welcomed, one's connection to that community is apparent in a glance, based on the extent of one's tan lines!

While I like nude beaches for a lot of reasons, one thing that really moves me is the courage of many who unabashedly walk the public beach having survived visible challenges: Bodies with dramatic scars. Women with mastectomies. Amputees. I was tickled to see a bent-over wizened couple who must have been well into their 90s, who were as darkly tanned as other regulars on the beach. There is certainly "conventional" beauty as well, as bodies on nude beaches come in all shapes, sizes, and conditions, although the average age is definitely older than on textile beaches. It really is clear that it is about accepting oneself and being comfortable in one's body.

I feel a deep authenticity about showing up only in one's skin, just as God made us. Without clothes, there is a much greater sense of equality, as signals about wealth and status are absent. For example, when photographing for my Over-40

Nudes project at Sandy Hook last summer, I worked with an African American couple (he in his 70s, she in her 60s), who had been introduced to me by their under-40 daughter who wanted me to photograph them. I was intrigued to see on my model release form that he was "Sir" James, and then to hear that he was a successful architect who had been knighted by the Prince of Sweden for his work in that country. While his clothes would probably have signaled his success, out of his clothes he was just a large guy with great posture.

The culture around us of course impacts our feelings about Body. I expect we agree that the culture does a really lousy job in this area. On the one hand there is a great deal of prudery and hiding the body as something bad. The culture puts huge emphasis on a very narrow ideal of beauty and decrees that anyone who does meet that narrow target (and actually no one feels that they fully measure up) should be ashamed of their bodies. The culture tells us we are ugly and should be covered up as we age, if not out of sight altogether. On the other hand, the culture sexualizes bodies with the continual message that body equals sex.

But nudism is definitely not about sex – not that there is anything wrong with sex in the right context. Even though I believe there is beauty inherent in bodies, your typical middle-aged body is just not necessarily going to be more sexy by being naked in the sunshine. Indeed, the objection one friend at Seekers has to skinny-dipping in mixed company is that it would diminish their sex appeal compared to the tantalizing cut of a swimsuit. And that is it precisely – nudism is not about tantalization or lasciviousness, but about self-acceptance and freedom and wholeness.

SUPPORT ON THE JOURNEY

Seekers' support and engagement has been very important to me and has allowed me to explore this path with the safety of being able to talk openly about what I discover, rather than being shamed into repressing what seems right and true to me. I do want to expressly thank Brenda for being so supportive, even though my path is not hers. I have been delighted to find some kindred spirits here at Seekers – several of us had a wonderful daytrip to Sandy Hook last summer.

As a serious photographer, I have sought to connect to others on these issues through photography projects. I've been pleased by the willingness of many of you to participate in those projects, even though it was a stretch for some. In 2004, I received a Growing Edge Fund grant for a nude photography project within Seekers that emphasized accepting our bodies as we are and seeing our not-so-young bodies as beautiful.

Over the last year, I've essentially taken that Growing Edge project to the world by launching Seeing Beauty in All: Over-40 Nudes. The new project is about creating beautiful black & white images of nude "ordinary" people – women, men and couples – over the age of 40, although most are in their 50s and 60s. It has generated a fair bit of positive response – and has its own Facebook page. As with the Growing Edge project, the experience of being seen and seen as beautiful when being photographed often helps many feel more self-acceptance and satisfaction with their bodies, and sometimes even a deep sense of healing. The photography sessions also influence me, as I take the time to look at people more intently if I am going to photograph them, and long after we are finished I continue to see them as more beautiful than

before.

My Over-40 Nudes project seeks to expand our concepts of physical beauty beyond people with bodies that are youthful and conventionally beautiful. I believe we can enhance that definition by seeing older bodies – complete with imperfections and evidence of aging – as beautiful because they have been lived in and have experienced life with all its joys and sorrows. My goal is to help us reclaim our bodies – to see ourselves in our fullness, to expand our view of beauty to the reality around us, and to appreciate the glory of bodies that have fully lived.

It is very clear to me that the honesty and vulnerability in appearing naked greatly impacts the experience of creating these images, as well as how they are seen and experienced – both by the person photographed and by others. The power of the project is in that simple authenticity of being exposed as human beings, exposed for what we really look like to determine whether there is beauty to be seen. I find that this authenticity is most challenging for those who actually may have the most to gain by taking the risk of participating.

AUTHENTICITY

I am up here because I want to be more fully known by you and in deeper conversation and connection about these issues of Body that are important to me. It feels risky, as I know that these issues can be easily misunderstood and may be shocking even at Seekers, particularly if taken out of context. And the larger world, with its myriad hang ups, may not be as understanding as you (I trust) are. I do have concerns about how this sermon would be received by some of my mediation

clients, were it to pop up in a Google search. For the same reason, my photography website has a page of nude images, many from the Over-40 project, but I do not link the Nudes page to my regular site. At the same time, this is an important part of who I am, and I do not like feeling I need to keep it hidden as though it were bad or shameful.

Let me also mention that while I believe we should love our bodies just as we are, I'm also a believer in taking care of our bodies with proper amounts of food and exercise, sunscreen and the like. But that's not this sermon.

LABELS

I have been slow to put labels on myself and partly for that reason have not joined any organized groups of nudists (or naturists as many prefer), although that actually might be one outcome of this sermon. I have been interested to see how much there is on the internet about Christian nudists, including a Fig Leaf Forum, which is something I had never looked for until now. Preparing this sermon has helped me claim the importance of this in my life, and it has somehow made me stronger and bolder and less fearful or ashamed in the world.

My daughter Lauren recently said that she didn't see why I thought this sermon was any big deal, as she was certain this is no surprise to most Seekers and that she has felt for the last dozen year that she was raised by a nudist. Not having labeled myself, it felt a little shocking to be labeled by my daughter.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION

In Genesis 3:11, after Adam and Eve turned prudish and hid their bodies, God asked "Who told you that you were naked?" It certainly wasn't God.

For me, a large part of this focus is about just Being. Somehow when sitting naked in the sun I am able to simply Be more easily than any other way. And this brings me joy. But my path is not for everyone, as Brenda assures me. And she reminds me not to be a missionary about it.

Where is this heading? My journey continues and I do invite others to join with me as that makes sense to you. I hope that my being more open about my Body path may allow you to have more freedom as well. I want to offer encouragement to those interested in being more intentionally in your Body. Among other things, my Over-40 Nudes project continues and I would be pleased to work with any of you.

\And I look forward to being in conversation with whoever is interested, including those who may well think I am seriously off track.

I look forward to the ongoing journey together – and would welcome you to meet me in my hot tub!

Amen.