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CLEANLINESS, CLOTHES AND COMPANY

Why They Don't Go to Church Any More.
Why Sunday is No Longer Special.

Long ago, when we lived in Syracuse, New York, we bought a remote lakeside property in the Adirondack mountains. It wasn't much: A small, one-room, wood-frame building, un-insulated, without plumbing. It wasn't really a tarpaper shack, but just barely above it.. There was a lovely fresh-water spring in the woods, and besides an outhouse and a tool-shed, the property included a beachfront boathouse. And it was very remote; We were almost always alone on the lake

We had a canoe but no boat, so one Summer we spent weekends turning the boathouse into a Finnish *sauna*. We winched it ashore, raised it on a cinderblock foundation, and built a floor under it. We insulated it, planked the inside walls with cedar, and divided the long interior space into two rooms, a sweat room and a changing room.

The changing room, just inside the entrance door, featured benches along two walls, and antique ceramic hooks to hang your clothes. In the corner stood half an oaken booze barrel, the kind they use for aging whiskey. The barrel had a hole in the bottom, directly over a hole in the floor: After sweating in the sweat room, you went into the changing room, stood in the barrel, and an obliging friend or family member poured over you a bucket of warmed water dipped from the lake – in winter, dipped from a hole you chopped in the ice – so you could lather up. It was all very primitive.

In the sweat room, we built in two levels of bench seats, and in a corner we positioned an authentic wood-fired *sauna* stove, with a kind of tray built into the top for holding your *sauna* rocks, a side reservoir for warming water for washing,

and a chimney through the roof . A wooden bucket with a rope bail stood by for pouring water on the rocks when you wanted steam. When you did that, the temperature seemed to soar fifteen degrees. There was always a *vihta* or two on hand, those small bundles of twig switches we cut that day from birches near the water's edge: A couple of times during the hour or so you spent there, you'd switch yourself, or your neighbour, lightly, to bring the circulation to your skin. And two or three times, during your *sauna,* you'd run naked outside to plunge in the lake. Or in the winter, to roll in the snow. As I say, it was all very primitive.

Our lakeside *sauna* featured one magnificent unexpected opulence, or rather two: A pair of Victorian stained-glass windows, one in the gable of the sweat room and one in the wall of the changing room. I had rescued them, risking life and limb under the wrecking ball, when the roof of an abandoned church in town fell in.

And yes, you were mother-naked, family and (selected) friends alike. *Very* primitive.

I tell you all this as a parable. Imagine it: It was so great, after a wearying day of pulling weeds from the water at our beachfront, or chopping wood for the cabin stove, or moving the outhouse (ugh!) to a new location, to be able to fire up the *sauna* and with family and (selected) friends get clean. To be able to wash off that sweat or muck or grime and relax with loved ones around the wood-stove in the cabin with a body that felt clean again! To slide a clean body into bed. To awaken the next day still feeling that pleasure of consummate cleanliness, and put on clean clothes for church.

And it set me thinking. This is Why They Don't Go to Church Anymore. This is Why Sunday is No Longer Special. It's the difference between life in an agrarian, rural society, and life in a city. It's the difference between labouring with the sweat of your brow and your back on the farm or factory, and working in an office cubicle punching a keypad. Three alliterative words sum it all up: Cleanliness, clothes and company.

Consider cleanliness. What a treat it must have been, for our farming forbears, to get clean, just once a week, in that Saturday night bath or *sauna*. Clean at last, clean at last, thank God A'mighty, clean at last!

But how different it is for us today! We're so clean we squeak. A shower once a day, maybe twice if you're going out for the evening. Lotions, deodorizers, perfumes, after-shaves, colognes, moisturizers: What a treat for us, on a weekend, to get your hands in the dirt, to work up a sweat in the garden or tennis

court or fitness club. To remain unshaven for the weekend. For myself, the last thing I want to do, on a Sunday, is get clean yet once again.

Or clothes. What a treat it must have been for our grandparents to put on a fresh set of Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes. For the men it probably meant a measure of pride, putting on the one suit you owned, with matching pants and jacket.

But for us? A different story altogether. The last thing I want to do, on a Sunday, is dress up yet again in suit and tie. Most modern urban types have to dress with some kind of propriety every day. It's a wonderful respite from all that, on a weekend, to be granted the freedom to dress like a slob. Well, at least less formally.

And even company. What a treat it must have been for our elders, living alone on the farmstead with only family at hand, remote, isolated, aching for companionship other than spouse and kids, to be able, on a Sunday, to see fresh faces at church! To catch up on the news. To socialize. To talk with old friends. To "visit", as they say to this day in the Midwest

But here we are today in our urban rabbit hutches, surrounded by people, hounded by people. People inescapably everywhere. The last thing I want to do on a Sunday is see other people. I want to escape the hordes I have to deal with day by day, Monday through Friday*. (I vant to be alone*.)

Am I anti-social or sociopathic in this? Hey, I like people. I'm a Myers-Briggs E-N-F-P, after all. But I can't imagine I'm the only one who's thinking these thoughts, as I dutifully shower and dress, once again in my starched collar and tie, and head grudgingly off towards Sunday worship. (I'm exaggerating, sure. But I have to confess there's at least a measure of that resentment in me, every Sunday.)

So that's why Sunday isn't special. That's why they don't go to church anymore. Oh, I know there are other reasons as well, some of them having to do with what you find when you get there. But some of the reasons have nothing to do with the promise of the Gospel message or the personality or persuasiveness of the Gospel messengers. It's simply a matter of cleanliness or clothes or company.

Back to our *sauna*: More than once I reminded our kids or our guests, or both, that a *sauna* is basically a bath, a way to get clean, and a bath is a typology for baptism. Martin Luther used to say that every time you wash your face, you should remember your baptism. And I taught my kids to plunge off that dock into

the waters of the lake yelling, “I have been baptized!”

One more thing: As a kind of dedicatory rite, when we finally finished the building of our *sauna*, we stenciled a Bible verse in bright colours around the top of three walls, like a frieze, in the changing room. It was *1 Corinthians 15:22*: “In Adam all die; In Christ shall all be made alive.”

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