

*"Where would we be now if the First Couple had refused to strategically place the fig leaves?"*

## THE NAKED TRUTH

A lifelong fashionista asks the essential question about clothing: Why?

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THE gorilla stands 10 feet tall, or so it seems. He's a giant, anyway. I'm five feet tall and weigh in the vicinity of 85 pounds, fully dressed. The gorilla is naked — which is the point of this story — and weighs, I'd guess, 600.

His mood at the moment is sour, putting it mildly, as he grips the iron bars that separate him from his freedom. He's a captive, forced into living as a specimen of his species for a gaggle of dressed-therefore-civilized humans.

I'm in a zoo, one of those horrendous institutions where most "animals" are caged while the human animals are free rangers. People, myself included, stand around gawking at the gorilla. Not at his hairy nakedness; just amazed at his size compared to our puny selves. I'm chagrined to be among the gawkers, but I couldn't resist seeing him up close and personal, despite the iron bars that divide us, for he must be kept behind bars to protect the free rangers. Stupid animal might hurt some innocent gawker.

Then it happens.

One of the gawkers has brought along a treat for King Kong's imprisoned cousin. A thoughtful gesture, to be sure. The gawker lobbs the banana at the gorilla, who catches it — *thwup* — in his hand. A one-second pause, then in one swift motion, the gorilla flings it back out at the gawker, smacking him upside the face.

I laugh. Folks back off. This behemoth might be dangerous, despite the caging. The crowd stares at his naked hairiness. The expression on his face is one of anger, or perhaps outrage, affront. The intensity of his red eyeballs scares the pants

off the human banana tosser. Can't the banana-throwing human see the gorilla has had enough fruit tossed at him already? And how dare he assume this gorilla wants a banana? A fresh papaya might've been more to his taste.

There we stand in our clothed bodies, free of iron bars, to come and go as we wish. There he stands behind those bars against his will, yet in a sense freer than all the gawkers combined. Free of the encumbrance of clothing that humans have used since they evolved from monkeys to brainiacs who, once upon a Garden of Eden, detected a voice commanding them to cover their shameful bodies lest others observe they possess similar anatomy to one another — and to the family from which they spawned.

Do the yard goods draped as concealment render us any better, or smarter, or savvier than the gorilla? More stylish, debonair? Is our sartorial armor a tactic applied to pretend we are separate from this other species, or are the clothes simply a competition among humans, the way cockscombs and feathers assign pride to the rooster, those eyebright feather fans to the peacock?

If we had naturally evolved like Grendel, that hirsute antagonist of Beowulf, wouldn't that covering serve to protect us from the elements? If we had kept our little tails and they had sprung colorful feathers, might that serve to seduce the other sex? We wouldn't need sexy lingerie or cotton-spandex underpants to cover every bump and bulge.

Oh, that's right; it's our highly evolved brain. We got so creative and well-to-do that we had to wear our social status on

our backs, our feet. Ouch! But couldn't we have still evolved intellectually without wearing clothes? Did the Almighty Voice of Eden require that before we could think like humans we needed to put on clothes? Where would we be now if the First Couple had refused to strategically place the fig leaves?

It's true that Cro-Magnons decorated themselves with strings of cockle shells and various accoutrements, perhaps because they thought the decoration would attract a lover. Or, were they simply, as many anthropologists concur, carrying their money around their necks and arms? Cockle shells were, after all, bartering coinage back then.

So why do we cover our bodies? Ah yes, modesty; and I agree it's civilized and even great fun to design, make and wear clothes. I'm grateful, too, that I don't live in North Korea. Grey and red all day, every day ... no.

Clothing covers the more unpleasant aspects of our bodies and accentuates our assets. Fabulous gowns turn ordinary girls into debutantes. Tuxedos turn jerks into the likeness of Fred Astaire. Or a waiter.

From the zoo, now to this Mexican beach where I sit and write. It's rife with both locals and gringos of all ages, shapes and sizes. It's hot in December, and clothing is at a bare minimum. Fat men in jockey shorts, immensely endowed women in their 80s wearing bikinis, letting it all hang out beautifully. Naked babies openly nursing at their mothers' breasts. Nobody gives a hot damn what their fellow bathers' bodies look like. Folks are having fun.

And nobody is throwing bananas. ♦