Personal History of Privacy:

An Evolutionary Tale

As a child I was always reminded of what a private place was: from a spot on my body to a quiet place like my room. Privacy meant being alone and by defining it as such I believe I was placed at a disadvantage. Teachers, my parents, and other adults in an authoritative position were the ones responsible for creating this mindset. After all a child learns by example. My mom would cry in her room. My parents would kiss when my brothers and I were not in sight, hopefully at least. The bathroom door was to be locked when it was occupied. My eyes were covered during a risqué commercial or scene in a movie. Essentially my childhood wasn’t that different from the ones led by my peers of the time, at least I don’t think it was.

Now when I say I was at a disadvantage I mean to say that such an upbringing can make it hard for a child to open up later on in life, effecting the idea of privacy and increasing the inability to share - heartaches, emotions, aspirations - with companions and friends during adolescence. During my childhood for instance, after a certain point in age, my brothers and I stopped bathing with our parents. Now for obvious reasons bathing in a group can be difficult and when children begin to develop it becomes somewhat inappropriate. However it is usually during this time that parents should make an effort to keep that connection by at least addressing the human body and it’s various parts. Instead I never received this kind of intimate education from my parents, which translated to not feeling comfortable showering after gym class in junior or senior high. It wasn’t until recently in my life that changing or being in the nude in front of long time buddies or my brothers felt okay. The subject of the human body and its functions was never talked about in my house. In fact it wasn’t until I met my wife that situations like the ones
I previously described would have been possible for me to conquer, but we’ll hear more on that later.

Showering with other men in a post athletic venue is just one really small part of the bigger picture. Because of my lack of info as a child, instead of opening my mind, as I grew older, my idea of staying as private as possible only grew stronger. Bathrooms for instance became hard to enter, especially in the public realm. I can recall points in time where I avoided the bathroom so that I wouldn’t have to be in there while others were. And standing next to somebody at the trough or row of urinals? Forget about it. My body, my genitals were mine and I didn’t want somebody looking at them nor did I even want to encounter the chance of accidentally seeing those of another. As I reflect on my first few paragraphs I realize I am sounding prudish, yet even shut in, but it’s truly not the case.

It’s probably here that I should mention though, that at about the start of my adolescence is when I first had a computer in the home. I would say I was about 12. It wasn’t long before I found inappropriate content and adult chat rooms, which consequently warped my ideas on the human body and only furthered my progression into being increasingly private about who I was and what I was doing. I would venture to say that my ability to keep secrets and hide my feelings developed at this point leading me to be even more private about my self. Of course this was all occurring at a very vulnerable state in my life. Middle school aged boys seem to have the hardest time just walking let alone navigating the surrounding world. I suppose my only qualm with this run in with technology and the web, is that I wish I had known of computer viruses or the potential for exposing your computer to the internet. Again this was a lack of education and sometimes supervision on the part of my parents. When we are children how can we be expected to know when enough is enough, or if something we are doing is unhealthy?
However, I am older now and with like all things, I too have evolved. The embarrassment factor surrounding the human body and the urge to stay hidden are both less present these days. I partly blame my wife, and subsequently the birth of my own children for this transition. I feel more open with my family, friends and the general public. The best part of the evolution in privacy is my honesty and humility. When you’re not holding back you allow yourself a chance to be more real. When you live with people, where you are more or less in charge, you tend to take liberties, pardon the pun, and discover a chance to be freer. Essentially I am taking my turn as a parent and hopefully instilling a sense of - for lack of a better word - shamelessness in my boys. I want my boys to know when privacy is key, when it’s at stake, and when it’s okay to be open and honest.

My perception of the web and it’s various services and social outlets have become keener as well. Now, I choose what to share, and when. And when it comes time for my children to access the power of the web you can bet I will be there to guide them through and supervise as much of what they do as possible. Involvement and stimulation is key to a child’s development and as such I feel I will be doing them a greater service than I was afforded by being eager to explore with them. Kids can’t go it alone. When I’m on the Internet for instance, I know that almost everything I get into is being tracked, monitored, stored, processed and sold to the highest bidder. I truly believe the Internet is the only place one can’t be anybody they want to. Today’s technological advances provide companies with very high powerful tools – hackers in some cases – to help monitor everything going on in their servers. My data isn’t safe as far as I’m concerned and knowing this allows me to check myself before I post anything, send anything, or visit any particular website. I wish I could make companies keep my info more private, but often times the services are offered for free, so a part of me knows a company with that business
model has to make money somehow. What better way then to market the data they’ve collected to advertisers trying to get further into the human psyche?

It’s apparent from my writings that my thoughts on privacy are a bit skewed depending on the circumstance. In the real world, at an early age, I found myself being reserved, hidden away, and I had an undying need to keep my thoughts and opinions as private as possible. As I matured into my adolescence however, my introduction to the harsh world of the Internet skewed my ideas about sexuality, sensuality and the human body. This vulnerable time in my life allowed me a chance to develop opinions no 12 year should have, and also drove me to stay more private about my actions on the web: the last frontier. Fast-forward to today and I would still say I am pretty secretive about my dealings within the web, but as a person my sense of personal privacy has become increasingly lax. I don’t shy away from conversation. I feel confident in a multitude of social situations. Best of all I can be completely open with my parents, siblings and friends. Evolution happens whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, but when we realize its happening a lot of who we were the day prior is no longer relevant. What we once kept private becomes okay to share. Standing at the urinal trough becomes manageable.