

Body language

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

In baptism, we are not only bathed but also clothed. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” writes Paul in his Letter to the Galatians. In baptism we are clothed in our true identity as children of God, an identity deeper even than our ethnicity, our social status, our gender: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-29).

The trouble, in this broken and struggling world, is that the honoring or dishonoring of our bodies is usually based not on a recognition of our true identity as God’s own children, but on our ethnicity, our social status, our gender. We may all be one in Christ Jesus, but the long history of damage done to Jewish bodies, enslaved bodies and female bodies simply because they were Jewish, enslaved or female (or black or homosexual or disabled or too young to protect themselves) gathers to a scream that threatens to drown out Paul’s revolutionary words. The fact that a portion of that damage has been done by Christians, sometimes in the name of the one in whom they were clothed at baptism, testifies to the ways in which baptismal garb, though invisible, can become stained beyond recognition.

Those clothed in the garments of Christ are called to clothe others. When you clothe those who are naked and unprotected, Jesus said, you clothe me. My friend Susan remembers her church’s attempt to clothe a refugee family from Cambodia. A man from the congregation stood before his brothers and sisters in Christ and asked them to provide clothing for the family. He told them that the children were getting ready to enter a new school and the parents were about to look for jobs that could support their new life in the United States.

A few weeks later, the man stood up again. He spoke in a quiet voice that was vibrating with anger. “I asked you to clothe this family,” he said. “Instead I have received castoffs from decades ago, clothes that are out of date, out of style. Clothes that are missing buttons, clothes with broken zippers, clothes that are dirty. These are not the kinds of clothes a man can find a job in. You would never send your children to school dressed in the clothes you have offered to this family. I am

not asking for your castoffs. I am asking you to clothe this family. “

This man knew that clothes could offer protection for vulnerable people in need. And he believed that those clothed in the garments of Christ should know better than to offer clothes that would offer no such protection, clothes that could even increase vulnerability. Because of his willingness to bear witness to what Christ calls us to when he calls us to clothe our neighbors, that congregation had an opportunity to think about the relationship between their baptismal garments and the clothes in their overstuffed closets. And they had an opportunity to try again to clothe the Christ who had asked for their help.

One of my students grew up in an Amish community and wore Amish garb until her graduation from college and her entrance into the more liberal Mennonite Church. Recently I heard her preach a beautiful sermon in which she reflected on the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus. Musing on how something had caused others to recognize Peter as a disciple, my student confessed to a nagging worry. “Now that I don’t wear clothing that marks me as a member of a Christian community,” she said, “is there anything about me that says I have been with Jesus?”

What marks us as children of God? Can our clothing bear witness to our commitments and our truest selves? Can the daily clothing of our bodies illuminate our invisible baptismal garb? And if bathing can heighten our attention to the mystery of our bodies and to our creation in God’s image, might the clothing of our bodies do the same?

People in every age have sought to illuminate who they are through clothing and adornment of the body. Just as we live in the tension of being a body and having a body, feeling sometimes that we are our bodies and at other times as if we simply wear our bodies like a garment that covers our true self, we human beings seem to have a great desire to wear clothes and adornments that do more than just cover our nakedness. We want our clothing to express something important about us. Not only do we have clothes, we are, in some sense, defined by our clothes.

Some express their deepest commitments through the refusal of adornment. The Old Order Amish wear their commitment to simplicity on their bodies in their plain clothes, unadorned even by buttons. Others, like medieval abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who often adorned her nuns in jewels that she believed reflected interior spiritual gifts, invest every button with meaning. Those in mourning often wear

black, allowing their clothes to speak their grief to the world. My friend Kay, who is losing her mother to cancer, believes that black also signifies, Watch out. I've lost my beloved and I am angry. Don't mess with me. In the Bible, grief and repentance are sometimes articulated in clothes of sackcloth and a head smeared with dirt and ashes and sometimes in clothes that are ripped and torn. When Reuben finds that his brother Joseph has been sold into slavery, he tears his clothes frantically, helplessly (Gen. 37:29). We wear our clothes as extensions of our bodies and as signs of what is happening invisibly inside of us.

Clothing can also be used to prepare for and mark a change in our lives. Brides and grooms adorn themselves gloriously in order to ready themselves for the moment when they will speak their radical promises to one another. My college always holds a clothing ceremony prior to graduation, during which graduates are clothed in their graduation robe by someone important to them. When my sister slipped my robe on over my shoulders and fastened the hooks with her beautiful hands, I felt myself putting on a new life, the shape of which I couldn't yet imagine. When Francis of Assisi, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, heard the voice of God calling him to a life of poverty, he unclothed himself before his raging father. The simple brown habit he afterwards wore expressed his interior commitments, just as the wounds that appeared on his body later marked his devotion to the suffering Christ.

Clothing can yield up a surprising amount of information; ask any teenager. In my high school, brand names, style of clothes and certain color combinations distinguished preppies from potheads from jocks. How important it was to us all to dress in a way that identified us with the security of a particular group, even those who considered themselves least bound by the requirements of fashion. Preppies dressed in relentlessly cheerful pastel pinks and greens that spoke of satisfaction with the way things were. Potheads (and other kids on the margins) wore flannel shirts and jeans, dark colors and dark makeup. The high school massacre in Littleton, Colorado, called the nation's attention to the way clothing marks off social groups in a school, and disaffected kids dressed in black across the country have endured intense suspicion in its aftermath. Tom Beaudoin, both a member and a student of Generation X, reads the Gothic look of many of these kids as a sign not of hostility but of grief. For him, black clothes and dark circles penciled around the eyes mark an attempt to master suffering by dressing ironically in the colors of mourning.

But it is not just teenagers who seek to wear their identities on their bodies; adults do so as well, and just as often. I've frequently heard middle-aged athletes in my

South Side neighborhood, for example, comparing their clothes with those worn by other athletes. In Chicago, athletes on the South Side pride themselves on dressing simply for biking and running on the lakefront, in comparison with their North Side counterparts, who are distinguished (to South Siders, at least) by their unnecessarily expensive equipment and dress.

Body adornments are popular, especially among young people. These are markings that go beyond clothing into the more permanent realms of body piercing, tattooing and scarring. These “body projects,” as historian Joan Brumberg calls them, turn the body itself into a canvas to be painted with one’s identity, a page to be inscribed with bodily experience. Web sites of those enthusiastic about body piercing suggest that having one’s eyebrow, lip, tongue, navel or genitals pierced is a way of claiming alternative space in the culture, of setting oneself apart from the mainstream. (Of course, once fashion designers, supermodels and pop stars pick up the trend, the alternative becomes the mainstream.)

Brumberg, who has devoted considerable attention to the body projects of American girls across several generations, believes contemporary body piercing is the inevitable outcome of “the pared-down, segmented, increasingly exposed, part-by-part orientation to the female body.” By wounding and marking each part, our culture’s relentless, evaluative gaze is permanently inscribed on the body. She sees another recent clothing trend, that of wearing underwear as outerwear, as further eroding the distinction between public and private and reflecting a profound confusion about intimacy that is dangerous for young women. (Interestingly, because young women talk about having their genitals pierced as a way of creating an erotic secret that they share only with their boyfriends, she also sees genital piercing as a way of claiming some private space “in a world where the body has been made public.”)

Tom Beaudoin has a different take on piercing and tattooing, one that takes into account the religious yearnings of those seeking to mark their bodies. “Piercing,” he argues, “signifies immediate, bodily and constant attention to the intimacy of experience.” Piercing and tattooing serve to bring interior wounds to the surface of the body and to bring sustained attention to the body itself. For him, this is the attention not of a culture transmitting its impossible expectations for the body but of those whose deepest experiences are oriented toward the body. For Beaudoin, navel piercing in particular indicates the exposure of the person’s center and invites others to “navel gaze,” to reflect on their own center of self.

For Beaudoin, piercing and tattooing also reflect the failure of contemporary institutions—most notably the church—to provide experiences that are deeply meaningful and so deeply marking. All of these trends in bodily adornment are shot through with Generation X's desire for meaning, for God. Beaudoin interprets the trend of wearing underwear as outerwear as reflecting a desire for "intimate disclosure, intimate association, intimation revelation." For Beaudoin, the same desire marks pierced and tattooed bodies as well.

For some people, however, marking the body is a sign of having had a deeply marking experience rather than a sign of their desire for one. When asked about her tattoo, novelist Darcey Steinke said she was honoring the person she had become after a time of great sadness: "I had had a bad year, marriage trouble and just a lot of sadness and I felt like I was different than I had been, transformed, and I wanted to honor this with a tattoo. A friend who's a stained glass artist did a design and I got the tattoo two years ago. I have not regretted it for one minute ever."

My mother came of age in the years before girls began piercing their tongues, but she does have two tiny scars on her ears from the day her older sister and a friend numbed them with ice cubes and pierced them with a needle. My mother had let the holes grow over long before I was born, but the two scars still mark her ears. She asked me to wait until I was 18 before deciding whether or not to have my ears pierced. Naturally, I did not understand this (although, being afraid of pain, I was secretly grateful for the impediment of her disapproval). But even though I longed to be able to wear pierced earrings, I waited. Eventually, during my first year of college, a dorm mate took me to a glassy mall where a man pierced my ears, not with ice and a needle, but with a gun that spit out earrings. I had to keep two awkward-looking gold-plated studs in my ears for six weeks, clean them with alcohol and turn them twice a day. Then, finally, I could wear the long, dangly earrings I had coveted.

Eighteen years later, I understand why my mother discouraged me. I have grown tired of adorning my ears. Of course, during the years when I thought my choice of earrings said something important about who I was, the really good earrings were always pierced, never clip-on. You never saw in the clip-on section any wonderful, dangly earrings of feathers and stone that would announce you as a sensitive, poetic young woman. But over the years I have lost interest. I have gone from wearing long, dangly earrings, to smaller, painted earrings, to two tiny sapphires (a birthday gift from my husband). My daughter lost the sapphires during one of her rampages

through my jewelry box, now filled mostly with old ID cards and single members of formerly two-earring sets, so I have now quit wearing earrings altogether. I give some thought now and then to going out to find some new earrings I might like to wear, but I don't seem to get around to it. I will, like my mother, be marked by a small scar, a shadow, on each earlobe.

My mother, I realize now, resisted my early requests to have my ears pierced because she wanted me to be unencumbered, free from having to wear earrings every day. It was one of the many ways she tried to teach me to hold nonessential things lightly so that I would have the strength to hold tight to what is important. And although it is admittedly a small thing, I do feel encumbered by these holes in my ears, mainly because I know I look as if I forgot to put on my earrings. So I try to regard them as marks of the girl I was, innocuous marks she left on my body on her way to being an adult more interested in paring down than in committing to additional adornment.

But that's just me. My idea of a great vacation is to be able to wear the same clothes every day, pausing only to wash them once in a while. I would love to have fewer choices about adornment cluttering up my day. For me, freedom of choice has become constraining, the time spent shopping or deciding what to wear a frustration.

Other people revel in the choices for clothing and adorning their bodies, finding the freedom delicious and rewarding. Let's face it—some people just know how to wear their clothes. This has nothing to do with having a particular body shape. I know plenty of women and men, of all shapes and sizes, who wear their clothes (and their earrings) like Cleopatra. They look great and they're a delight to gaze upon. Writer Daniel Mendelsohn writes of his classics teacher: "She was so emphatically herself that she forced you, by the very fact of herself, her presence, her jewels and cigarettes and intellect, to react, to be yourself, to think." For some people, adornment is an extension of who they are and expresses something important about them, so that even jewelry gets gathered up into the force of their personality, becoming a part of it, adding to it.

If we are to honor our bodies, it is important to pay attention to how adornment frees or constrains us. What is constraining for one person can be freeing for another. Whereas tattooing may seem a violation of one's freedom not to be wounded and permanently marked for one person, it might be a gesture of freedom

for another. But some clothing trends promise freedom while keeping silent about the ways they constrain. Distinguishing what binds us from what sets us loose to be ourselves is not always easy.

Joan Brumberg tells a story about the women's history classes she teaches. As they studied the lives of girls and women in the 19th century, her students, dressed comfortably in sweatshirts and jeans, lamented the constraining girdles and corsets worn by women of the previous century. As the conversation moved to contemporary life, however, the subject of pubic hair removal came up. This is necessary, her students insisted, so that you can feel confident at the beach. Brumberg was amazed that these young women, with all their freedoms, felt the need to "strictly police their bodies." The greater freedom to bare their bodies on the beach brought with it a set of anxieties that not only constrained but also created a market for more body products. "Progress for women," Brumberg notes, "is obviously filled with ambiguities."

Another kind of constraint, a serious violation of freedom relating to clothing, is the reality of sweatshop practices, including child labor, to make many of the clothes we wear. How and with what we adorn ourselves often has implications for the literal freedom of others. Horror stories crop up from time to time: new immigrants to the United States enslaved by those who provided their passage, and forced to sew around the clock; children in the Third World working long hours in the garment industry for almost no pay, making clothes destined for this country. Enslavement to the commodification of adornment makes this other, more terrible slavery possible. God intends for all of us to be free. The practice of honoring the body requires habits of adornment that make us vigilant about the effects our choices have on others.

"Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" Jesus asks in Matthew's Gospel. Like my mother, wishing me to be unencumbered enough to travel quickly and lightly toward the most important destinations, Jesus urges us toward freedom. "Why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." Are your habits of adornment a burden or a pleasure, a source of anxiety or confidence? Do your clothes free you to be yourself, or do they constrain you by forcing you into an identity that, however fashionable, you would not have chosen? Did the production of your adornments constrain the freedom of another? These are questions that might guide us in our clothing and our adornment, to help us develop our own ideas of what is beautiful, and to allow the

daily practice of getting dressed remind us that we are children of a God who desires our freedom.

Several years ago, having miscarried a cherished pregnancy on the day after Christmas, I found myself seemingly screwed to my bed with depression, unable to work, read or pray. I was, however, able to talk on the phone. Day after day I wore out my friends, especially my friend Kay. The year before, Kay had left behind job, salary and colleagues to spend a year in prayer and silence. Violating her dearly bought solitude again and again, I cried on the phone, "I am so depressed that I can't even pray. I try to pray, but I can't." A few days later, a package arrived from Kay. It contained a simple beige jumper and a note that read, "I have prayed in this dress every day for a year. You don't have to pray. Just wear it. It is full of prayers."

I did wear that dress. I wore it and wept in it, and cried out Why? to God in it. I let the prayers in that dress pray for me when my mouth was dry and full of ashes. And when I became pregnant again, I continued to wear that dress. Kay loves long, loose clothes, and her dress was spacious enough to accompany me nearly to the end of my ninth month. Her prayers were spacious enough, too, to gather up my fear and grief and anger. And my joy, when it came.

I was naked in my grief, and my friend clothed me. Clothing others is a Christian obligation, to be cultivated in every area of our lives. No one must be left naked. I was fortunate enough to participate in a seminar a few years ago that was led by the Mennonite educator Shirley Hershey Showalter. We had gathered to think together about the relationship between our religious lives and our lives as teachers and scholars. Shirley laid out a rich feast of texts for us to consider. But she insisted that we ourselves be the most primary of those texts. Each of us was invited to offer a ten-minute spiritual-intellectual autobiography so that we would understand how each other's questions and passions had been forged and fired. Shirley was very strict about those ten minutes—she set an alarm clock to tell us when our time was up—but she always allowed ample time for the group to respond to each autobiographical reflection. "We will leave no one standing naked," she insisted. "Everyone who makes herself or himself vulnerable, we will clothe."

When you clothe those who are naked and unprotected, Jesus said, you clothe me. "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (James 2: 15, 16). These teachings refer, of course, not to

spiritual or psychological nakedness but to literal nakedness—nakedness that is unprotected from cold or heat, rain or wind, or from the gaze of others. The practice of honoring the body includes the clothing of those in need.

The *New York Times* recently reported that “castoff clothes have become the flotsam of turn-of-the-century affluence. Americans bought 17.2 billion articles of clothing in 1998 . . . and gave [to] the Salvation Army alone several hundred million pieces, well over 100,000 tons.” Many of these clothes come to the Salvation Army stained or otherwise beyond repair; these are shredded, bundled into bales and sold to rag dealers. “Clothes—” said one woman interviewed as she shopped, “I go through them like water.”

Many of us go through our clothes like water, adding more and more to our overflowing closets as seasons and fashions change. If you’re like me, a portion of those 17.2 billion articles of clothing are hanging askew in your closet or stuffed into the back of your bureau, unworn. My friend Kay has two rules about her clothes. The first is, if it goes unworn for six months it is taken out, cleaned, pressed and given away. And the second is like it: when a new article of clothing is purchased, some other article of clothing is donated to someone who needs it. Nothing new comes in without something else going out. In this way, Kay never thinks of any piece of clothing as belonging to herself alone; every shirt, every dress, every coat is destined for someone else. And so she cares for her clothes with that someone else in mind. She keeps them clean, she keeps the buttons tightly fastened, she keeps the zippers repaired, so that when the time comes to give them away, they are in beautiful shape for someone else to enjoy.

There may be times in our lives when we will be called upon to take the coat from our back on the spot and give it to someone in need. But my friend’s simple practice is a way of keeping in mind every day our obligation to clothe others, a way of holding those others—whose names we may never know—in our minds and our hearts. It is a daily preparation for giving.

We are called upon to clothe others by a God who clothes us at baptism and offers us again and again, never giving up, the clean, beautiful garments of mercy, justice and kindness to wear. Because God has compassion for our nakedness, God is a God who clothes. The Book of Genesis imagines God making clothes for Adam and Eve, who had been shamed by the knowledge of their nakedness. The Book of Ezekiel describes God clothing Israel, who is imagined as a child abandoned in the

wilderness, dirty and naked, her umbilical cord uncut.

Then I bathed you with water and washed off the blood from you, and anointed you with oil. I clothed you with embroidered cloth and with sandals of fine leather; I bound you in fine linen and covered you with rich fabric. I adorned you with ornaments: I put bracelets on your arms, a chain on your neck, a ring on your nose, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown upon your head. . . . Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of my splendor that I had bestowed on you, says the Lord God (Ezek. 16: 9-12,14).

Our nakedness is never beyond the reach of God's desire to clothe and adorn us. Our bodies are never so exposed that we cannot be clothed in the garments that God offers us new in every moment. Kay knows this. During the last days of her mother's life, she offered her mother a bath. The gesture echoed the bath in which her mother was first clothed in the garments of faith. And Kay's mother knew it. Together they were teaching each other how to die, how to live in the desire "not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Cor. 5:4). n