

Mormon nudist. An oxymoron?

HOW I BECAME A MORMON NUDIST

By D. Michael Martindale



As everyone knows, nudity is bad. It's simple. Nudity equals sex. Which is why my jaw dropped when eight years ago, I learned about a website called LDS Skinny-Dipper Connection¹. To me, this name was an oxymoron

on the level of "military intelligence." I *had* to check it out.

According to the site, its constituency is "Faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." "Families forever, naked and not ashamed," it said. "Wholesome interest in social nudity under appropriate circumstances," it said.

I smirked. This was going to be entertaining, reading the rationalizations of these people trying to justify this kind of thing!

I read through the website. I read every word—and there were a lot of words! They claimed that nonsexual social nudity is a positive, beneficial thing. It's educational because it allows everyone to see what human bodies *really* look like—rather than consuming the glorified, air-brushed images we see in the media every day. It strips away the mystery of the human body—especially those parts we keep hidden from each other—and decreases lust because people become comfortable and familiar with all the body parts. It combats body shame and negative self-image. It fosters openness and trust because it allows you to be *completely* who you are and still be accepted by others.

When I finished, to my shock and amazement, I exclaimed, "They're right! There is no doctrinal objection to *wholesome, nonsexual* social nudity!"

Oh, there were all sorts of LDS cultural objections, all sorts



D. MICHAEL MARTINDALE is the author of the critically acclaimed LDS novel *Brother Brigham*. He has been a naturist activist for several years and is in the process of developing a website on family naturism at FAMILYSKINNYDIPPERS.COM. Martindale lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, and works as a Web developer.

of "folk doctrines" against it, lots of objections to sexualized nudity. But no bona-fide official doctrine against nonsexual nudity.

It's just that most people don't know there is such a thing as nonsexual nudity. Remember the equation, "nudity equals sex."

THAT WAS ALL I needed: permission from people who understood my LDS hang-ups. I printed out the entire LDS Skinny-Dipper Connection website and presented the thick sheaf of paper to my wife. "Read this, and tell me what you think," I said to her.

She didn't read all of it (there were a lot of words!), but she read a large portion of it, handed the papers back to me and said, "Well, I think it's rationalization, but if you want to do it, go ahead." (Bless her heart.)

I did. I became a full-fledged, practicing Mormon naturist. From other naturist hikers, I learned how to hike nude safely. I visited places such as Diamond Fork hot springs in Spanish Fork Canyon where a tradition of nude soaking has existed for decades, and eventually I visited a few naturist resorts and nude beaches.

The first time I attended the temple after I started practicing naturism, I was apprehensive. Walking into that environment, I didn't know how I'd feel, knowing all the things I had done naked. Because, really, all I had was an "intellectual testimony" of naturism. Rationally, I was convinced. But being born and raised in America and within the LDS Church, I had a lot of emotional conditioning that wasn't so easily overcome. Would I feel guilty? Would an evil spirit follow me inside, alerting a discerning temple president to my unworthiness? Would God strike me down? These were the agitated thoughts that churned in my mind as I entered.

But as I walked from the front desk where I showed my recommendation to the changing room, a feeling of peace came over me. It seemed to say, "Don't worry about it. Everything is okay."

For three years, that was the only spiritual manifestation I had that my choice to embrace naturism was acceptable to God. But from time to time, it would hit me how out of step my naturism was with traditional Mormonism, and doubts would arise—am I really deceived like most Mormons would consider me? I remember one time in particular when my wife

and I were invited to a hot tub party with a clothing-optional dress code. She brought her swimsuit; I didn't.

Before the party, we attended the wedding reception of a family in the ward. We sat and ate mints and nuts and white cake with another couple in the ward. The whole time, I kept wondering what this couple would think of me if they knew what I'd be off doing right after the reception. After all, it was not so long ago that I was laughing at the thought of a Mormon nudist.

WHILE MANAGING NORMAL day-to-day living, I struggled and studied and meditated and prayed over the doubts engendered by both halves of my life. But the doubts always vanished when I hiked. To commune with nature in my natural state was such a transcendent experience that doubt just melted away.

I discovered how "blind" I had been before, smothering almost my entire organ of touch with clothing. Hiking clothed was like hiking with my hands over my eyes and peeking through little slits between my fingers.

Feeling nature on every square inch of my body was exquisite. I craved the touch of the wind where it had never touched me before. I could sense the slightest changes in temperature. The connection I felt with nature was palpable.

One summer I took a trip to Moab, Utah. I'd learned about a trail called Negro Bill Canyon that had a tradition of nude hiking, and I wanted to check it out. The first half of the trail extended through a tall slot canyon with a perennial stream running through it. Trees and vegetation filled the base, and Moab's characteristic red rock towered above.

After the halfway point, the trail rose above the vegetation and plunged into a side canyon. Austere beauty surrounded me—cliffs and rock formations here, a partially formed arch there, all blazing with color.

The sun beat down on me, but at the end of the trail I found a small shaded cove beneath a large arch. Water trickled down a slit in the wall, and I knew that trickle would become a waterfall during a rainstorm. The water formed a small pool in the middle of the cove. The shade and moisture cooled and refreshed me.

On my way back, a storm swept in. The sky crackled with thunder and lightning, and the wind funneled through the canyon. I walked through a narrow corridor with willow-like trees thrashing on either side of me. At the trailhead, I lay with my naked back against a flat, sun-heated boulder and let the wind and raindrops pelt and chill the top of me. The sensation was indescribable!

When the wind starting pelting me with sand, I ran for my vehicle. It was

lunchtime by then, and I was starving. But there was one more trail I wanted to explore that was further up the highway from Negro Bill Canyon. I decided to take a quick peek at that trail before driving into town for lunch.

The trail is called Fisher Towers. I'd learned about it in a book on hiking trails in Utah. It was supposed to be a gold mine of astounding rock formations etched by the wind over eons. The storm had subsided, but it had done its job and cleared any other hikers out. Nude, I stepped out of my vehicle and examined the area. Even at first glance I could tell this would be an incredible hike.

I decided to walk up the trail—just a little to check it out—even though I was starving and had left my water bottle in the car. But as I walked, more and more fascinating shapes came into view, enticing me to walk a little farther, and a little farther, and a little farther. . . .

The main formations came into view, and they were breathtaking. Tall towers that looked like cathedrals and monstrous statues straight out of *Lord of the Rings* loomed above me. There was an eagle head, a gargoyle, titanic sundials. One formation looked for all the world like a *Planet of the Apes* version of Mt. Rushmore.

Awe is the only word I can use to describe my feelings. I had never seen anything like it. As I hiked and admired the view, I meditated on the exquisite beauty of nature, on the deep connectedness I felt to God's creations enhanced by my embracing of naturism. I was also thinking about sharing the principles of naturism with others.

At one point, I became so overwhelmed with the panorama before me that I cried out, "I am seeing the hand of God!"

Immediately I was blasted with an indescribable power that washed through my entire body. The burning drove me to my knees and caused me to pray. I had felt the Spirit of the Lord



"I guess we should have called first. Is there anything we can do for you?... Like get your bathing suits?"

CALVIN GRONDAHL, SUNDAYS FOYER

before, but this was more intense than anything I'd experienced in my life.

And it went on. The burning engulfed me as I hiked on, step after step, minute after minute. It wouldn't let up. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, thirty. The trail brought me higher above the Colorado River valley, and the view from up there was astounding. Before me stretched endless miles of red desert and exotic formations, and through it cut a path of green on either side of the river's blue ribbon. The river stretched across my view laterally, and then plunged away into more of the wide canyons that follow the Colorado River wherever it goes.

For an hour, the burning continued, never relenting. I felt like an integral, intimate part of nature. I felt so right being there without the artificial covering of clothes separating me from God's creations. If someone had come along clothed, I would have felt they were violating this sacred place.

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I ended up hiking about two miles before turning back. The powerful burning finally subsided, giving hunger and thirst a chance to kick in. I struggled to get back. My legs became wobbly as I suffered from dehydration, and it took all my energy to return safely to my vehicle. As I walked, I realized that—albeit unintentionally—I'd been fasting from food and drink when that experience had hit me.

I'd planned on staying another day or two in Moab, but anything after that experience would have been anticlimactic. I returned home at once, eager to share my experience with my family and naturist friends.

There was no doubt in my mind I'd had a spiritual experience that testified of the existence of God. But I also felt it was a divine affirmation of my acceptance of naturism, and a calling of sorts to share my beliefs with others—to go ahead with the plans I'd been contemplating.

AND NONE TOO soon! Just a few weeks later, my bishop called me in to his office. He'd found out I did things naked.

I knew he wouldn't understand any more than I understood before I learned about naturism, but I also knew that, because it was so clear and obvious to me, I could explain it.

It didn't work. To him, I was indulging in perverted things, and I needed fixing.

First he played the modesty card—the one that underlies every Young Women's lesson and permeates the BYU honor code. I explained my view that modesty is a relative thing changing from circumstance to circumstance, from culture to culture, from time to time. I explained that modesty is in the heart and in the mind, not in the amount of fabric we drape over our bodies. I explained to him how naturism had helped diffuse the intense lust I could feel at the sight of an attractive female because the body had been divested of its mystery and titillation.

Possibly feeling that he was losing ground in the discussion,

the bishop switched to the policy on wearing garments. He pulled out the statement the First Presidency had sent to local leaders about wearing garments night and day and read it to me. I pointed out the sentence in that statement that says that how one wears the garment is a decision between the individual and the Lord. I told him that I did wear my garments day and night, and intended to for the rest of my life, but that I believed naturist experiences were one of those times when the wearing of garments was impractical, since it's impossible to wear garments when you're trying to be naked. I told him I

believed naturism was a wonderful, positive thing well worth removing garments for—certainly more beneficial than the mere recreational pastime of swimming, which is considered a perfectly fine time to remove garments.



Finally, he pulled out the big guns. He asked me if I could imagine President Gordon B. Hinckley

doing things naked. (I couldn't, but there were many other things I couldn't imagine him doing, either.) He asked what I thought the prophet would say if I asked him about naturism.

I have no idea what he'd say, but I'm not sure he'd condemn it. And I told my bishop as much.

I finally decided to play my trump card. I bore my testimony of the experience I had in Moab—how the Spirit of the Lord had witnessed to me that naturism is a positive thing. I knew he couldn't resist my powerful statement of testimony.

He could resist it. He told me my spiritual experience was deception from Satan and dismissed it.

My bishop decided he needed to escalate the issue to the stake president. I met with the president and my bishop together, but I said as little as possible. I knew it would be a waste of time. The stake president explained that if my inspiration was in contradiction to his inspiration and that of my bishop, I should consider myself on shaky ground.

By that point, I had studied, meditated, observed, experienced, and prayed for three years about naturism. They had spent, at most, an hour or two, praying—just praying—making no attempt to study or understand naturism. I couldn't understand how that put me on shaky ground.

I guess that was the day I learned that living the life of an LDS naturist requires living a double life. As a naturist, you reveal your beliefs on nudity to fellow Latter-day Saints at your own peril. It's one of those topics for which rational discussion seems impossible. The concept of naturism is so alien to the orthodox Mormon mindset that there is little common ground to build on.

I expected that disciplinary action would be brought against me, but nothing ever happened. I eventually moved away from that ward. My former bishop kindly made sure my next bishop knew I was a naturist, but I moved twice more and managed to escape my reputation.

Though I escaped, friends of mine in the LDS naturist community (yes, there is a community) have not always fared as

well. One friend stood before a stake-level disciplinary council and made a heroic effort to explain naturism. When he finished, they admitted they couldn't come up with a viable reason to condemn naturism, but they just didn't feel right about it, so they disfellowshipped him for "conduct unbecoming a member."

Another good friend of mine was excommunicated because the whole ward assumed things about him based on the fact that he enjoyed being innocently nude.

But not all reactions from Church leaders are negative. There is no way to predict how a local leader will react to the revelation that one of his members is a naturist. One engaged couple I know ran afoul of the BYU Honor Code because they had skinny-dipped together and were barred from the university. Their bishop asked them one question: "Was it sexual?" When their answer was no, he promptly interceded and got them readmitted.

Reactions of local leaders are unpredictable because there is no official Church stand on naturism. This is as it should be. Naturism is one of those issues where members should do their own study and prayer and seek their own answers from the Spirit. Indeed, if you talk with many Mormon naturists, you will find that they have received compelling spiritual witness about their practice.

THIS IS WHAT I have found from my past eight years of being a naturist: Naturism is modest in the right settings. It diffuses lust. It fosters trust and acceptance among people. It teaches a healthy attitude toward the human body and heals body shame. It educates children and helps them develop healthier attitudes in their relationships with the opposite sex. It even protects them from predators because they are more open about their bodies and are more prone to report suspicious behavior.

I have seen naturism help individuals heal from pornography addictions. Naturism provides positive, wholesome images of the human body. Naturist children have their curiosity about the human body satisfied in safe, controlled environments under adult supervision instead of sneaking peeks at pornography with their friends. Adults who finally experience the difference between pornographic images of the human body and innocent images available through naturism can see the ugliness in the pornographic image. It begins to lose its appeal.

These are the things I've learned in the eight years I've been a Mormon nudist. I'm as converted to these beliefs as any Mormon is to the teachings of Joseph Smith.

Yet I can't share these discoveries with my fellow Saints. As I've sat in endless lesson after lesson, sermon after sermon on the ills of pornography and watched the efforts of Church leaders to combat this problem largely fail, I anguish to know I have a simple solution that can help many people heal, but I have to keep it to myself.

NOTE

1. The URL for LDS Skinny-Dippers Connection is WWW.LDSSDC.INFO. Further information on naturism can be found at: www.naturistsociety.com/.

THE MODESTY BLOG

By Paul Swenson

Modesty's the hottest topic in the Bloggernacle. The body is a tabernacle and must be covered by a sack or tent, in order to prevent the baring of a shoulder, or of skin above an older woman's ankle.

If you are female, what you're wearing may be sin, if it inflames the lust of Mormon males, whose lonely struggle with testosterone entails that they avert their eyes, or disguise awareness of a woman's bust or thighs.

Not only men are penitent about forbidden thoughts that may arise from tight, revealing clothing. "Heterosexual Married Woman" writes that she is flustered by immodesty. "Won't notice breasts of women clad in modest tees," she says. "But please avoid a clingy shift—especially if it's cold. Catch my drift?"

Some bloggers hasten to confess a secret yearning for a sundress, or self-consciously disclose they burn to wear J. Crew, as liberated women do. A few still grieve they bought the obligation to venerate the sleeve as sanctified, when they put on the Mormon vestments of a bride.

When slogging through the product of male blogs, observe a certain reticence to gauge appropriateness of manly dress—except the rightness of white shirts and ties. Which leaves guys free to contemplate indecent penchants of their mates. Tim scathingly complains he can't imagine why their mothers can't refrain from dressing little girls in two-piece bathing suits. Another dense galoot alludes to a distressing prevalence of "non—wife nudity."

Forgive my rudeness, if I see beauty in the human form—and do not look away. Show me the marbled limbs of lovers in Rodin's "The Kiss," and—pray—the-full-blown masculinity of David by Michelangelo. Artist who sculpted us to model God and Goddess may find idolatrous and pat, fixation on false modesty. Blog that.

