

Notes From the Wayside, April 2024
by Tara Ludwig



Wayside shrine in Merttert, Luxembourg

I must confess to having, like many folks, a secret favorite “guilty pleasure” TV show. Granted, it is a lowbrow show that contributes nothing whatsoever to my intellectual development, but I enjoy it for its sheer entertainment value, even though I would be mortified to ever publicly admit to being a fan (which, ironically, is exactly what I am about to do).

The show is called “Naked and Afraid”, the premise being that two wilderness experts trained in bushcraft and primitive survival skills are plopped into an exotic location (the Amazon rainforest, African savanna, Philippine jungle, etc.) with only a knife and a pot as they attempt to

survive for 21 days. The team must use only the natural resources available in their environment to create a shelter, build a fire, purify water, and find food; and, as you may have guessed from the title, they do all of this while wearing nothing but their birthday suits.

The two survivalists paired up in each episode are often polar opposites: a hippie flower child with a militant ex-marine, a brash New Yorker with a proud Southerner, a passionate hunter with a strict vegetarian. Undoubtedly, the producers of the show arrange the partnerships this way in hopes of upping the drama factor and creating good, trashy reality TV moments. And, inevitably, sometimes personalities do clash and teammates end up angry and disgusted with one another by day 21.

But what I find interesting is that most often, this is not the case. It is more common that teammates who begin the challenge as diametrically opposed strangers end it as deeply committed friends. I have seen many lifelong friendships begin on the show, and survivalists often refer to their teammates as their family or tribe.

How is this possible? In the “real” world, people with opposing worldviews or conflicting beliefs usually end up as rivals or even enemies, yet two naked strangers dropped into the Peruvian jungle can overcome their differences and become best friends. Why?

My sense is that the stripped-down (no pun intended) environment the survivalists find themselves in creates a strong dynamic of interdependence. Without their partner, the very survival of each teammate is in jeopardy: there will not be enough firewood, clean water, or food if they do not cooperate and work together to reach these common goals. The survivalists become responsible for each other’s lives; and this mutual interdependence solidifies a bond of trust and respect that surpasses all petty differences.

In other words, the survivalists on the show experience what it means to radically need, and be needed by, another person.

I fear that we, in the “real” world, are in danger of losing our capacity to need each other. Our society has become progressively more and more independent, and all our technology seems aimed at eliminating our need for other human beings: twenty years ago I may have called my Mom for a pizza dough recipe, whereas now I can just Google one (though it certainly will not be as good as hers). At the supermarket, I don’t need a grocery clerk because I can use the self-checkout stand, and I don’t even need an artist to paint me a picture, because AI can do it just as well. I don’t need to ask anyone for help because Alexa and Siri can answer all my questions, and I don’t need a bank teller because I can do all my banking through an app on my phone.

While all of these technological changes may have increased efficiency and convenience, they have also alienated us from one another by supplanting our need to build relationships with other human beings. We may come to believe that we, as individuals, are entirely self-sufficient; we don’t need anyone. And it is much easier to hate people, to ostracize entire groups and turn them into enemies, when you don’t need them in order to survive.

But I don't think humans were designed to be completely self-sufficient. God created us to need each other. In the Pauline epistles Paul talks about God's people as "the Body of Christ", highlighting our innate interconnectedness by stating that we are not isolated individuals but a part of something much bigger:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many... The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"... God has put the body together... so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (Corinthians 12:12-27, edited for length).

A physical body needs all of its parts to work together in harmony, each playing the role God intended it to play; chaos would ensue if the hands suddenly decided that they could do all the walking and the feet were not really necessary after all. But this chaos is exactly what we inflict upon the Body of Christ when we decide that a person or a group of people is our enemy, and falsely imagine that our lives are not deeply connected to theirs.

I wonder how our society might change if we lost all of our technology, if all of our luxuries and comforts were taken away and we were suddenly left, like the teammates on "Naked and Afraid", with nothing but each other. If we had to rely on our neighbors and strangers for our survival, would we remember the value of needing one another, and rediscover our identity as members of the Body of Christ?

If you would like to ponder this question further, and see lots of tushies in the process, I highly recommend that get yourself a bowl of popcorn, curl up with a nice blankie on the couch, and give "Naked and Afraid" a watch. (I promise I won't tell anyone.)