

## vulnerability and the human condition

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more important than clothing?”*

Matthew 6:25

Human beings have a limited tolerance for feeling vulnerable. Sure, when babies are born, we honor their fragile nature and embrace it as part of the miracle of life. We swathe them with our warmest blankets and softest clothes and bathe their delicate bodies with soothing cleansers and lotions. We cherish the helplessness of infants, accepting their limits without question, at times being contented by their dependence on us. In most cases, we are comfortable with their messiness and unpredictability, changing their diapers at inconvenient times and feeding them at all hours of the day. We expect them neither to have control over their embodied selves nor to be perfect.

However, as the years pass, our expectations and comfort level regarding their vulnerability slowly change. Children’s parents, along with their physicians, teachers, and

caregivers, track and foster the children's growth out of this original state of dependence. We anticipate development from this fragile and vulnerable condition toward reaching the appropriate physical and social milestones. We have patience throughout the process. As babies begin to walk, we don't ridicule them when they fall. Instead, we keep encouraging them toward their goal. When children begin to dress themselves, we forgive and even embrace their mismatched socks and bunched-up pants because we know they are learning and this state of disarray is temporary.

Without fail, as children grow up, our acceptance of their limits wanes, and we find that the world is far less forgiving of their frailties. Messy bodies are understood to be in need of fixing, so much so that as soon as children step onto the playground, they are strongly encouraged, if not bullied, into acting and—more important for this conversation—into *looking* a certain way. A clumsy gait is no longer cute, but rather a possible first sign of a developmental delay. Runny noses could symbolize poor hygiene, and last year's fashions often signify a lower social and economic status. Neediness is read as a sign of weakness. Children are faced head-on with implicit social rules about their body and embodied practices to which they must conform. Nonconformity risks at the very least scorn, and at the very worst being treated as less than human. All of us experience an unsaid but deeply felt correlation between the norms of dress and the norms of humanity.

Perhaps the pressure on children today is not this bleak, and I am being too sensitive to growing pains. Yet few make it through childhood without experiencing some of these stressors, creating anxiety that transcends their childhood and follows them into adulthood. Clearly,

beyond playground politics, the college students I encounter report that when they go on their first job interviews, they must prepare to meet certain expectations about dress and clothing taboos as well. For instance, they tell me that while most of their peers have tattoos and piercings, having too many is unfavorable in professional contexts. So if they really want the work, they need to cover up the tattoos with long sleeves and remove the nose rings.

What I am hoping to illustrate here is that at every stage of our life, what we wear and why we wear it largely result from a negotiation of anxiety about what is expected, what is the norm, and what is considered human. Nonconformance to social expectations is at times read as a sign of weakness, of not being properly socialized, and even a scar on our humanity. The bottom line is that showing weakness and vulnerability either on the playground or in the boardroom is unappealing to others and often a liability. Yet even though we learn from early childhood on that our clothing has the potential to hide our human frailties and neediness, and we struggle to adhere to what is considered “normal” rather than “deviant,” many of us barely pass the test, and our humanity is challenged. The impossible ideal of perfection, which seems to be the new look for humanity, is always just beyond our reach.

The pressure to be perfect and have total control over one’s body at all times is ubiquitous. If school and work don’t convince us that to be human is to keep our bodies in check, the media are quite effective in spreading the news. Every time we turn on our television or surf the Internet, this or that advertisement practically brainwashes us into believing the idea that if we adorn ourselves appropriately and perfectly, we can escape teasing and succeed in life. Some scholars, particularly those in the field of disability

studies, refer to the cultural notion that we can and ought to control our bodies in order to be successful and happy as the “myth of control.”<sup>1</sup> *Success* is one of the slippery terms and in this context usually means being in control of life, not being dependent on others, and practically being perfect. Conversely, feeling mentally, physically, or spiritually out of control, being dependent and interconnected with others in complicated relationships, not fitting into the norm, and being less than perfect are framed as problems that need to be overcome. A question to ponder is whether vulnerability is always part of the human condition. If the answer is yes, then why do we hide from it, and why does it make us so anxious? In other words, *why do we worry?* We may not need diapers, but someday we might. We may not need bibs, but when we are tired and as we age, drooling can and does happen. Once we mature, we may be able to live on our own, but we always need companions to enrich our life journey. When framed this way, neediness is part of creaturely existence.

### **Vulnerability as a Fact of Life**

Jean Vanier, a Canadian Catholic thinker and humanitarian, has devoted his life to demonstrating that vulnerability, far from being aberrant and abject, is a universal and transcultural norm in all creatures. For Vanier, we do not grow out of vulnerability; on the contrary, we grow into it. Our embrace of being limited, vulnerable, and mortal is the catalyst for our true freedom. Vanier is founder of L’Arche, a global network of residential communities where traditionally “abled” and “disabled” people live in Christian fellowship, appreciating the other’s humanity and gifts. This experience allows him to see the grace of

vulnerability in all relationships, even as an invitation to communion with God and others. In his work *Becoming Human*, Vanier describes how each one of us is called to open up to our vulnerability, to imagine our neediness as way to connect with others and God, as an invitation for deep, sacramental relationships.<sup>2</sup> He argues further that exposing ourselves to this physical, emotional, and spiritual nakedness is what makes us human. Reading Vanier, one intuits that we

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are chosen as creatures to enact our freedom in ways that expose our neediness to others. Our neediness then is not only a fact of life, but also a gift that orients us and our freedom toward others.

This is a vastly different sense of freedom from the one in which many of us have been raised—an individualistic and privatized notion of freedom in which the totality of our choices are geared toward personal advancement regardless of the cost to those around us. To be free in this commonsense way requires that we hide and suppress all feelings of vulnerability, as they have become conflated with powerlessness. At least for the past century, in the industrialized, capitalized superpower nations, to be human means to be powerful, to make it on one’s own, and not to need anyone for help. It is interesting that from somewhat of a skewed Christian perspective, many of us have been socialized into thinking and feeling that being limited is a fault that needs to be rectified, even a *sin* that requires purgation and payment. We have lost sight of the

reality that being creaturely is correlative to being imperfect. As a result, we have a blind spot that fools us into thinking we can overcome our weaknesses.

When we begin to really think about our dress habits, we may come to see that clothing allows us to cover up our so-called sins and mask all our uncomfortable feelings about being creatures with limits. Not all dress is used for this purpose, since sometimes we use dress to cover up from the dangerous elements of our environment, such as the seasonal climates of heat and cold. Without gloves in a snowstorm, we risk the pain of frostbite. Without sunscreen to block the damaging ultraviolet rays in the summer, we risk the suffering associated with sunburns or, even worse, skin cancer. These are practical instances in which clothing allows us to survive. Still, much of the time, our adornment practices are far from pragmatic and rather more a way of conforming to social pressures and satiating desires to be accepted as “normal.” We don’t wear just any hat or boots; instead, we dress to meet social expectations and match up with norms of style, class, gender, religion, and so on. We dress to look good, which makes us feel less anxious about our social standing. Our clothing wields cultural capital in that it protects us from negative judgments by our peers. In consumer culture, we have come to believe, as the English philosopher Herbert Spencer once noted, that our dress can provide us with a “peace” that religion fails to offer us.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, more often than not, this “peace,” or high even, is short-lived. If we are unable to adorn ourselves or our loved ones with the “right stuff,” whatever that is, we experience a terrible low, an unsettling anxiety, throwing us into a cycle of decline. In this way, dress has become an accomplice to humanity’s denial of limits, fostering distorted

conceptions of human existence and resulting in destructive relationships.

For Vanier, and imaginably many Christians who are trying to live as Jesus did, this interpretation of what it means to be human is dangerous. It is disturbing to conceptualize human limits and vulnerability as something to be avoided, especially when Christians are called both to imitate a messiah who seeks out the vulnerable in society and who embraces exposure on the cross, and to worship a God who through the incarnation becomes human in the fullest sense, including that of having limits and being vulnerable. Vanier hopes to show that this perverse reading of vulnerability and the resulting self-centered notion of freedom fail to reflect the spirit of the Christian tradition and damage our capacity for well-being. While such notions of freedom that are related to being independent and being in control may appear to support our flourishing, the effect is short-lived and superficial, leaving us with what he calls a “false” sense of self, whereby our freedom closes us in on ourselves. To “become human,” we have to risk living without this pretense of being free for ourselves only and accept the liminality of relationships with all types of individuals and communities. For Vanier and others like him, being human is a process that takes work, including vigilance about how we understand our sense of self and use our freedom in relation to others, and here we would be right to include all others—human beings, animals, plants, and so on.

Thinking about vulnerability as a fact of life and a gift from God sets the stage for examining how our dress practices reflect our understanding of freedom and their impact on our quality of life. One way to understand clothing is as a fluid, porous border between ourselves and

others, in which what we wear and why we wear it have as much effect on others as on ourselves. When framed this way, our dress bonds us to all others, creatures and the creator alike, in an intimate and profound way. In getting dressed, we have the choice of acknowledging this border not only for the good of ourselves but for all creatures. Do we dress in a way that is hospitable and in solidarity with others, or in a way that cuts off relationships with them? These are the types of issues and questions that Vanier's work stimulates. Exposing our vulnerability in genuine, embodied relationships can be beautiful, and by revealing our needs for another's love, touch, and protection, we open ourselves to the depths of the human heart.

*Vulnerability and the Real World.* Some of the college students I encounter hope to get a job that pays enough for them to live in the city, while others are on their way to graduate school or service internships. Whatever their story and aspirations, most really appreciate Vanier's insights about healthy relationships and commitment to the marginalized and, as previously mentioned, Paulsell's attentiveness to body as a site of sacred vulnerability. Yet they are quick to interject that vulnerability and neediness are not readily accepted in Western consumerist culture. On more than one occasion, students have pressed me on this simple question: *What's so great about vulnerability?* Sometimes they put it this way: *If we are all trying so hard to avoid being vulnerable, why would we work so hard to embrace it?* One student wanted the bottom line on accepting vulnerability by asking, "What's the incentive?"

These are the tough and important questions—the "so what?" factor, as I like to put it. I want to respond in a



way that confirms the rigor and genuineness of such critical analysis, not with a stilted catechetical response like “Christians believe God made humans that way,” or “The incarnation sacralizes that lived reality.” Even though these points are sound, such a quick response is insensitive to students’ concerns, especially as some do not consider themselves particularly religious. Although their skepticism does not come out of the blue, I find myself fumbling around as if this were the first time I had been confronted with these questions. I manage to give an abbreviated yet affirming response, but my students want and deserve more. We all feel a ton of pressure to demonstrate that we have our lives under control and that we do not need much of anything from anyone. I experience those pressures and the negative stress associated with the students. So before I get to the theological responses, I empathize with them. I know firsthand that exposing one’s feelings about being less than perfect and in control—needing others—can be terrifying. What if the thing or person we need is unavailable or just plain uninterested in being in a relationship? I, too, at times wonder about what is so good about being limited, about being confined to the laws of time and space, about being mortal, and about fundamentally being unable to survive without others, particularly in a culture that prides itself on the values of independence, individualism, and autonomy. These concerns catapult us to the shadow side of vulnerability, where neediness becomes a dirty word.

Dress, like many of the other embodied practices we engage in every day, negotiates these two sides of creaturely existence—the vulnerability that invites relationship and the vulnerability that repels it. While all might benefit from embracing vulnerability as a fact of life,

Christians in particular—since they believe human frailty to be sacramentalized in the incarnation, in God becoming human—are obligated to deal with this tension, to imagine vulnerability as a way of connecting to others, and to reject any notion that vulnerability is a defect or sin. Beginning here may provide a well-deserved response to the “so what?” factor that is less sickeningly sweet and ultimately more honest. Moreover, as a side note, the desire to overcome our vulnerability is futile, since we can never get beyond our finitude, our here-and-nowness, our mortality. When we fail to recognize the futility of this desire, we risk squandering important opportunities to develop deeper and more life-giving relationships with others.

So back to my student’s million-dollar question: *What’s the incentive?* The answer for me is *the good life*—a life in which we are genuinely free, in a way analogous to what Vanier envisions, whereby freedom is activated by exposing our humanity to the other. Fear constricts our choices, and when we relinquish and/or transform our anxieties about our humanity from fear to hope, we are opened to new horizons and new heights.

*Anxiety and the Human Condition.* Dealing with human apprehension about being mortal, and thus about having limits, is not new. Throughout history, theologians, philosophers, and of course clinicians in the fields of psychology and psychiatry have been concerned about the effects of this anxiety on human existence. One of the world’s great religions, Buddhism, teaches us that desire brings suffering, and we need to overcome that desire to reach enlightenment. Christians also have conceptual frames for explaining the damaging effects of desire. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr, a

prominent American Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, claims that a fundamental challenge to human existence is the anxiety caused by our desire to be perfect and godlike, even with the knowledge that creaturely existence is characterized by limits and, of course, mortality.<sup>4</sup> This anxiety is not necessarily sinful, according to Niebuhr, yet if it is not acknowledged and worked through, it has the potential to cause pain and suffering and lead to sin and brokenness.

When read this way, anxiety presents an invitation to find out what drives us and whether that is healthy and life-giving. In not paying attention to moments of anxiety over feeling vulnerable, and even denying that anxiety with a pretense of being superhuman or above it all, we may find ourselves in negative patterns of self-loathing. In the context of the daily practice of clothing, we may be repeatedly disappointed in what we look like, perhaps developing eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorders, which harm girls and boys, women and men. This is only part of the problem. We also could end up passing on these patterns of self-loathing and fear of being vulnerable to our loved ones, and perhaps integrating them into our market economies, leading to damaged relationships within local and global arenas. As we work toward constructing a spirituality of dress, I hope we can begin to imagine moments of feeling anxious as requests to learn more about our relationships with others in the world. As such, that anxiety is not always a bad thing.

This may need further explanation, as many of us go to great measures to avoid anxiety in our everyday lives. We value mental and physical exercises, such as prayer and yoga, that reduce the harmful effects of stress. We pay a lot of money and sometimes endure burdensome side

effects for pharmaceuticals to alleviate some of the more extreme cases of anxiety, in which people are unable to participate in ordinary daily activities. Such exercise and medications are great gifts, particularly in the success stories where lower stress levels have improved people's quality of life. At the same time, some instances of anxiety can be helpful, particularly moments of stress that move us to understand more clearly our needs and the needs of others. Feeling anxious creates the possibility for pausing in our everyday activities, reflecting on why we are doing what we are doing, and even transforming patterns that threaten our well-being and that of others. Anxiety can be a catalyst for imagining a healthier living environment and for sustaining the best of Christian community. Regardless of one's level of piety, it is beneficial to think about the everyday practices of clothing, to examine if and how our adornment practices serve to cover up our anxieties about the neediness of being a creature, as well as to consider the possibilities of retrieving vulnerability as a virtue rather than a vice.

### **What to Wear?**

Whether we have been preparing for an exciting event such as a wedding or a somber occasion such as a loved one's funeral, we all have had to deal with this one seemingly innocuous question: *What am I going to wear?* For some, answering the question is exciting, producing what we might call an adrenaline high. Planning an outfit allows us to show off our creativity, to tell the world who we really are, and to attract friends and lovers—in other words, to relate and connect to people and the world through our clothing. At other times (sometimes at the same times),

the simple question of what to wear is enough to stress anyone out. Limited resources may hinder our ability to purchase the right clothes or any at all. We may not fit into the fashionable styles, for not everyone can wear “skinny” jeans. We may even be forbidden from wearing what we want or what makes us feel comfortable. All these obstacles can cause us to feel anxious and overwhelmed.

*Do Not Worry?* As already alluded to in the beginning of the chapter, the gospels of Matthew and Luke portray Jesus as warning his followers against worrying about what to wear and what to eat, urging them instead to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to [them] as well” (Matthew 6:33). Nevertheless, living in consumerist culture, one is hard-pressed not to worry. In fact, getting dressed has the opposite effect, stressing us out to the point at which we are practically consumed and worn away by the thought of it.

In these instances, a better reading of the gospel may be to *pay attention* to what we are worrying about, rather than *not to worry*. For in being attentive and acknowledging the worry, we take a step toward overcoming and transforming that worry if it is death-dealing. Embracing the stress of what to wear creates a moment to examine how vulnerability and freedom unfold in the human condition and how dress is a potential symbol of a commitment to life-giving relationships with God and others. In the words

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of Paulsell, feeling stressed out could motivate Christians to imagine that “the daily clothing of our bodies illuminate[s] our invisible baptismal garb.”<sup>5</sup> For Christians, baptism commences a lifetime of imagining dress as a way of being human that respects God and others, whereby we are called to embrace vulnerability within ourselves and with others as a way of connecting with

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**What’s so great about vulnerability?**  
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them. Facing our anxiety about what to wear may provide moments to renew our baptismal promises and reflect further

on how we can dress in a way that orients us for life-giving relationships with others.

Struggling with the issue of what to wear is not just a Christian concern; many individuals and groups already pay attention to how their clothing affects others. Some are vigilant about where they shop and how the workers who produce and sell the apparel are treated. They are concerned about whether the workers are compensated with a living wage and whether children are being exploited at any point of the process. Others are vigilant about knowing who or what is used in testing out cosmetic products and surgical procedures. Still others, most obviously feminists, are troubled by the way social norms force individuals into rigid gender categories, making one choose between a living a girl’s story or a boy’s story through their dress. From a myriad of angles, intellectuals and ordinary folk pose important questions about the stories we tell about what we wear and why we wear it, as well as about the effects of those stories on the others around us, rendering storytelling an important dimension of a spirituality of dress.

*Clothing as Story.* Ever since I was a little girl, I can remember how much anticipation and preparation went into dressing for a party. Whether it was a new dress for Easter, my First Communion dress, or as I got older, what I would wear for a night out on the town, the big question then and now is what to wear. Planning the right dress is a way to tell my story, to reveal who I am and who I aspire to be. Each one of us has stories, and in acknowledging our stories about what we wear and why we wear it, and reflecting on them and sharing them, we may find that others have similar anxieties and worries, and perhaps even find hope and grace in them.

In a poignant essay, “Jewish Genes, Jewish Jeans: A Fashionable Body,” Karin Anijar recollects her mother’s funeral in Miami, expressing how so much of her Jewish identity has been negotiated through dress.<sup>6</sup> Since the casket is late to arrive for the funeral service, Anijar has to explain the delay to the mourners. She apologizes to the crowd and half-jokes when she announces, “Mother is late. It seems there was a sale at Neiman-Marcus (an up-scale department store).”<sup>7</sup> As Anijar weaves clothing practices with autobiography, we catch a glimpse into how shopping and having a certain type of look facilitated the assimilation of Jewish immigrants and their families into American culture. A hilarious and heartwarming essay, yet more than that, Anijar’s work is challenging in that it invites readers to think about how our adornment practices tell our stories, locating us into certain identities, signifying all sorts of codes about gender, race, nationality, citizenship, and religion. What does a specific pair of shoes symbolize about our ethnicity, or how does a certain cosmetic procedure reveal our story about who we are and what our struggles have been? Christians might learn from Anijar’s work that storytelling is an

important component of spirituality. Conceptualizing our clothing in terms of symbol and story—as autobiography—challenges us to narrate who we are publicly, to think about the choices we make in our adornment practices, and to embrace all the anxieties we face about finitude.

It is worth bearing in mind that, at least on the intuitive level, there is a slight difference between symbol and story. A particular item of clothing might have symbolic meaning in that it points to a particular referent. Sometimes symbols are easy to read; for instance, when someone is wearing a certain sports jersey, it usually means the person is a fan of that particular team. However, if someone is wearing a cross pendant on a necklace, the symbolic referent may be more ambiguous. It could refer to the individual's belonging to the Christian religion, or perhaps it is merely a fashion statement. For a while, celebrities were wearing crosses all the time, seemingly not for religious reasons, but rather just because they were in style. This is where reading symbol necessitates story in that knowing the individual's story aids our understanding of the connection between a specific item of clothing or dress practice and the identity of the individual in question. That knowledge comes only from mutually sharing one's thoughts and feelings about what we wear and why we wear it. Similarly, wearing a pink ribbon symbolizes support of breast cancer awareness and research, but to really know the dresser's story, we have to ask questions about his or her life, and the person has to share. Is the person closely related to someone who has had breast cancer? What is the person's story?

Some dress stories are more complicated than others, especially when told interculturally. Explaining the culture of Afghan women in the United States and the practice of



veiling, also known as *hijab*, M. Catherine Daly argues that, to outsiders (meaning those unaware of the Afghan ethnicity), all veils look alike.<sup>8</sup> For insiders, in contrast, each particular veil marks differences in country, class, and so on, dependent on the material, colors, and other features. In this example, reading another's story is far from obvious. In situations like these, instead of assuming one knows what this or that symbolizes, it might bode well to ask the person about his or her apparel directly and honestly. This is not necessarily being intrusive, but trying to be educated and even "connect" with another person on an interpersonal level. In such an exchange, both parties really need to listen to the other person's story about dress, rather than making all sorts of assumptions.

Even after having read this essay on *hijab* in my Religion and the Body course, students sometimes still have difficulty embracing the full story of Muslim dress and unwittingly fall back into stereotypes about Islam and the "oppression" of Muslim women. Many students scoff at the words of the Muslim women who say they feel freer when veiled. Students explicitly or implicitly assert that these women are deluding themselves and must be victims of some sort of false consciousness. Every so often, when one brave student in the class turns to the others and asks how their own cultural dress practices might be seen as oppressive, the conversation becomes even more intense and complicated. Questions such as these arise: Are U.S. secularized women really free when they are supposed to wear stiletto heels and midriff shirts as a sign of their femininity? Aren't we all, regardless of specific culture and custom, constrained by norms of dress? What often ensues in class discussion is the argument that not all norms are bad; rather, the refusal to allow for any

sort of deviance from the norm is potentially harmful and damaging. Moreover, students begin to argue that when individuals and groups name people as deviant without paying attention to the meanings and values of the specific culture to which they belong, this, too, has the potential to become damaging and even lead to violence. A good example of this occurred when Christian missionaries labeled non-Christians as heathens in need of saving, largely due to their difference in dress and appearance. This dangerous phenomenon of “otherizing” continues into the present day against any who deviate from Western norms.

Most of us don’t otherize people because we are mean; we don’t exclude and bully them because we have deep pathological problems. Many of us resort to such tactics because we are so afraid of not being accepted, of not being in control, and, even worse, of others finding out that we are less than perfect. We like to know who the boy is and who the girl is, so we know how to behave toward them. We like to know what is considered civilized and what is considered uncivilized, so we know how to act. Ambiguity in any of these scenarios has the potential to reveal our vulnerability and our anxiety about it. Taylor argues that the contemporary rage of tattooing is a way of signifying all the ambivalence we feel and ambiguity that exists in the world between what is savage and civilized, what is normal and abnormal.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, adorning our body is a way to navigate the stressful complex web of creaturely existence.

As one might imagine, engaging in these sorts of conversations about the messiness of embodied existence in life and in the classroom leads to touchy moments when we find ourselves walking on eggshells to avoid offending others or coming off as self-righteous. With caution we

proceed. We know someone can get hurt by our words, so we tread lightly. We begin to realize that freedom in dress is a complicated concept, especially when we begin to think about how norms of dress organize our worldview, our sense of right and wrong and of good and evil. Norms of dress define what it means to be human and what it means to be something or someone else. In those touchy moments when we feel uneasy about either our dress or that of another, we are invited to dig deep and question how dress fosters either grace or brokenness. This is really difficult work, as it asks us to think about issues we never really have time for and because it is personal and even emotionally painful. Telling our stories and admitting to these touchy moments is a risk-filled process. Delving into our adornment practices will in all likelihood reveal discrepancies, contradictions, and anxieties about what is socially acceptable, what a normal body looks like, and even more basically, what is normal as opposed to deviant. While a course on Religion and the Body is a more than apropos venue for such discussions, Christians in all contexts would benefit from sharing their dress stories—the ones that bring good stress, the ones that bring bad stress, and the ones that bring both—as they work to create a more life-giving community with God and others.

### **Good Stress**

Thinking back to all those events in my life that were dotted with dresses and crossed with new hairstyles, I honestly can say that at times (not all the time), the question of what to wear resulted in stress that was positive, motivating, and inspiring. Moreover, each of my outfits represented personal stories of hope—for good times,

life-giving friendships, and a happy future. Even though as a child I never thought of clothing this way, as an adult—as a woman, a mother, and a teacher—I have come to realize that there is a positive energy in planning what to wear. Clothing encourages us to be creative and imaginative and to open up to others in all our human vulnerability and frailty.

Furthermore, dress is not merely the life story of an individual. Communities experience and exhibit hope through their dress as well. In some African American communities, wearing one's best to Sunday services, complete with elaborate hairdos and costly clothing, is an important part of celebrating the congregants' embodied selves—bodies that historically have been raped, lynched, mutilated, and murdered. Gwendolyn S. O'Neal explains that all the anxiety and stressors related to their Sunday dress actually moves African Americans toward the good in that it hopes for a freedom previously unattainable.<sup>10</sup> When framed this way, adornment is an exercise in preparing ourselves for salvation, both here on earth and in the world to come, for the here and now and the hereafter.

While the preceding examples certainly capture some of the good feelings and hopeful thoughts related to clothing, there is a danger in using the phrase *good stress* in regard to our dress practices. That danger comes from a tendency to conflate good stress with happy times. As I understand it here, good stress does not emerge only in pleasant occasions, but rather in any dress event in which we work toward attaining genuine freedom to be vulnerable and to create healthy relations with others. This would encompass any number of social functions (prom to funeral) that conjure any number of emotions (elation to despair). Take, for example, the death of a loved one.

As we dress for the person's memorial services, we may feel sad and physically and emotionally weighed down by our loss. These emotions may cause us to put less effort into our dress. Perhaps we won't style our hair the usual way. We purposely may wear dark colors. We adorn ourselves in these ways to signify our grief. While the death of a loved one could cause all sorts of stressors, including financial worries and concerns for those left behind, our dress is not necessarily a sign of the bad stress or the anxiety that makes us want to hide our neediness with others. On the contrary, our funeral garb is a perfect example of an embrace of our vulnerability, a time when we are not afraid to show that we are dependent on others or to admit that relationships do, in fact, matter. In this case, what we wear and why we wear it are good in that they reflect our love of and honor for the deceased, including our complicated history of being needy and dependent on them.

Keeping with the notion that our funeral garb could be one of those invitations to embrace our vulnerability—in other words, manifest as good stress—it is arguable that such clothing creates the possibility for us eventually to move on and be hopeful again. In the Jewish tradition, there is a part of the funeral ritual during which members of the immediate family rend or tear their garments as a symbol of their grief. This is an instance of the good stress of dress, not because the death of the loved one is positive, but because this expression of vulnerability is cathartic and potentially transformative, moving the mourners to be hopeful for a brighter future.

*Hope for the Here and Now.* Certainly, hope is an important theme in the Christian imagination. I already

have alluded to being baptized in the clothes of Christ as a symbolic ritual in which one is set on a trajectory of following Jesus' footsteps, all the while being supported with the care and concern of the larger Christian community. And in several of the examples offered in this chapter, including that of the Black church, the journey of Christian discipleship is sustained through dress by a commitment to and hope for salvation in the world to come. When we talk about the everyday practice of dress, however, the notion of hope needs to be nuanced a bit, for it is far too easy to conflate the theological idea and practice of hope with the *eschaton*, meaning the end-time, or what some like to call heaven. This is not necessarily wrong for Christians; in fact, it is an orthodox reading of hope. Yet if the whole intention of this book is to understand our ordinary day-to-day activities as invitations to meet God, then we cannot focus solely on hope for the afterlife.

It is worth returning to New Testament scripture to get a handle on the connections among what we wear, why we wear it, and what Christians believe about salvation in the here and now and the hereafter. Both of Paul's letters to the Corinthians emphasize this link between the end-time and dress in an effort to underscore how fleeting is the importance of day-to-day trivialities. In fact, the ordinary practice of clothing is used as a literary device to emphasize the importance of the resurrection of the body and the kingdom of God: "For this perishable body must put on [clothe itself with] imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:53); "[F]or in this tent, we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling—if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked" (2 Corinthians 5:2-3). These verses use clothing as way to argue that followers of Jesus are

called to perform a certain way of being—one oriented toward God and eternity.

An important thread in Christian tradition and history, these sorts of texts certainly strive toward what I have been proposing: a spirituality of dress based on hope for a better world and a life-giving community. However, in our day and age, the danger of these texts is that they spiritualize dress too much. They could give rise to the perception that the here and now does not matter, fostering dualistic beliefs that are antagonistic to the world and the body. In an age of globalization, with consumerism proliferating throughout the world, electronic communication dominating our interpersonal relations, and virtual reality redefining our sense of being, it is fair to say that we are already alienated far too much from the value of embodied being. Spiritualizing clothing or any other embodied practice does nothing to retrieve the virtue of embodied vulnerability.

For those who want to get more comfortable with and even embrace the exposure of embodied being, another way of reading these Pauline texts is to emphasize hope in the here and now, not just in the hereafter. Christians might profess that we are all created in God's image and then through baptism and a life of discipleship are clothed in a fashion that orients us toward God and life-giving community, both here on earth and in what comes next. Put another way, being created with a certain dress—that is, in a sacred adornment of the image of God—sets us on a path that may reach impossible heights both in this world and in the world to come.

*A God Complex?* By now, it probably is apparent that part of the good stress of our daily dress practices is the

way we exhibit hope for a better us and a better world. Christians have a particular way of speaking of the call to transcend ourselves in terms of being created in the “image of God.” We read in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). While scholars understand this text in varied ways, one can say confidently that a core belief of Christian faith is that human beings are created with a gift from God, with the spiritual adornment chosen by God, one that reflects God’s goodness, generosity, and interest in others. Being created in the image of God means having the look of God, or perhaps the imprint of the divine within us—a force that liberates us from our false sense of self, the closed self to which Vanier alludes, to a sense of self in which we are open, exposed, and vulnerable to being in genuine give-and-take relationships with others.

While receiving the gift of this image is flattering, it may at times feel more like a curse. We may think we are like God in that we assume we can have total control and are capable of perfection. Returning to the work of Niebuhr, one could make the claim that this is a fundamental paradox that human beings confront: being created in the image of God and being finite, having glorious promise and being constrained by mortality. This stress can be good, particularly when we draw on this anxiety to stretch ourselves emotionally, yet it also can spiral into a phenomenon of what I like to call the “god complex.” We tend to say someone has a “god complex” when we want to disparage the person’s actions, when we think the person has taken his or her sense of self too far and has no recognition of his or her limits or the needs of others—when we find the person conceited, egotistical, and self-involved.



This is the bad stress related to being human and manifests in our dress practices, as we will see later in this chapter. For now, it might be worth revisiting Genesis and finding some good in the god complex, especially if what we mean by “god complex” is being magnanimous, creative, sacrificial, and so on.

The negative aspects of the god complex are tempered by the alternative image for humanity we find in Genesis 2, one in which humans are understood to be vulnerable, needy, and best when they are in relationship. When Christians read, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18), they are confirmed in their dependence on others and even encouraged to find solace in companionship. This story is often read as an oppressive and sexist narrative, in that the woman is made second and is the man’s helper. It could also be read as a story about someone so lonely and incomplete that he needs another to bring authenticity to his life. This alternative reading of Genesis 2:18 emphasizes a God who endorses the human capacity for earthly love and friendship. Moreover, the second chapter of Genesis ends with these words: “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). This statement points to the theological truth that being exposed in all our imperfections and neediness is part of the human condition and God’s divine plan, and it corroborates Vanier’s position that vulnerability is a normative dimension of humanity.

## **Bad Stress**

Not everyone experiences the “what to wear” question with anticipation, creativity, and hope to live and reflect the image of God. Very few of us can muster the wherewithal

to embrace the neediness and nakedness of the human condition. Many individuals, myself included, go all out to cover up neediness by attempting to look right and achieve the elusive goal of being in control and perfect. Feeling out of control, powerless, and less than God, we dress in an effort to shield ourselves from the emotional, psychological, and spiritual stress caused by our own or another's negative judgments about our human frailties.

There are reasons for this defensive response. Everywhere we look, vulnerability and limits are defamed, especially in consumerist cultures that seem to work and profit on the notion that limits need to be overcome. I like to refer to this as the "just do it!" mentality, memorialized by Michael Jordan in Nike advertising where he is pictured jumping with the ball to great heights, a sign of his dedication to greatness and his ability to overcome limits. In the midst of global capitalism, it is easy to be led into the predicament of wanting to be more than one can be as a creature—to have it all and then some. Overcoming limits

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is part of our cultural commerce. The media trade in this commerce by advertising the ability to overcome finitude and creatureliness through vitamins and steroids, age-defying makeup and cosmetic surgery, and cleansers and lotions.

While popular brands and products speak to our desire to transcend our limits and achieve what some perceive as

perfection, they can also cause what I have been calling “bad stress” in that the hope they promise quickly turns into despair when we cannot achieve the goals of the brand. Even with those running shoes, we are still imperfect. Even with Botox treatments, we are still aging. Even if we shower three times a day with the latest cleansers, we are still needy. Theologically speaking, Niebuhr considers this situation to be a result of a fundamental aspect of the human condition, what he calls an “essential homelessness of the human spirit,” in which we are always bound by creaturely existence but oriented otherwise and/or beyond.<sup>11</sup>

That homelessness is unsettling and leads to our insecurity in which we do everything to cover up. This psychic and spiritual homelessness prevents us from embracing finitude as a gift from God for life-giving relationships with others.

This compulsion to hide our weaknesses goes beyond our consumption of specific articles of clothing, cosmetics, and so on to encompass the stories we tell regarding gender and vulnerability. *Big girls don't cry. Boys don't cry. Stop being codependent. You're so needy.* How many of us have been told these words or uttered these words ourselves? Our everyday sayings socialize, if not police, children into masking their fears, vulnerabilities, frailties, and weaknesses. We tend to glorify people who push through

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at all costs, including athletes who compete when injured to the point of hurting themselves further. These are the stories of bad stress that dominate our lives, often leading us into patterns of brokenness with God and others.

*A Cosmological Time-Out.* Christian stories are a resource for navigating this homelessness of the spirit that impels us to experience bad stress and push ourselves beyond healthy human limits. For instance, Genesis 3 is profoundly a story about the importance of being attentive to boundaries and of not succumbing to the negative effects of the god complex. The scriptural passage opens with God giving the first human beings anything they could want in a beautiful locale, except they are not to eat from the fruit of one tree. As many are aware, the narrative heats up as Eve submits to the serpent's temptations. Both she and Adam trespass against God's wishes and their human limits by eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, perhaps succumbing to what Niebuhr means when he speaks about the essential homelessness of the spirit.

This story moves me to empathize with all of us who are struggling to embrace our limits and vulnerability. It would be hard to resist the possibility of not dying, having my eyes opened, and being "like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5), as promised by the crafty serpent. After all, Christians are taught to believe that humans are created in the image of God, so this is the next step, right? Many of us today meet the figurative serpent in the form of tempting advertisements that promise youth and beauty. I will look younger if I just use this or that face cream, and I will look thinner if I just buy this or that diet product. Individuals and communities experience "the fall" over and over on a daily basis.

What is so interesting for this discussion is that after Adam and Eve eat (which is in and of itself a profoundly human activity of vulnerability), they feel compelled to dress: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight for the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Genesis 3:6-7). This passage is often read as a moment of shame, but another way of interpreting it is that, at that moment after eating, they are faced with their vulnerability, and it makes them uncomfortable. The problem is not nakedness; it is feeling bad about being naked. Analogously, the desire to be like God is not a bad thing; on the contrary, the challenge arises in accepting limits and creatively transforming the anxiety that being human generates. Perhaps we can read Genesis 3 less as a story about God punishing humans for not knowing their place and more as one that teaches about experiencing the negative consequences of vulnerability when creatures fail to realize their limits. That experience creates a cycle of covering up, which manifests in patterns of brokenness in our lives. These negative patterns eat away at our most cherished relationships by destroying our ability to accept and love ourselves and others in all our finitude.

*The Impact of Bad Stress on Freedom.* However one approaches Genesis 3 and its implications for Christians, we have seen already from the discussion of Vanier’s work that worrying about our vulnerability impairs our freedom. Moreover, for a spirituality of dress to emerge, we

must reenvision freedom in light of our vulnerabilities. In embracing our limits, even in how we approach something as ordinary and mundane as our dress, a more life-giving sense of freedom emerges, one in which we are thoughtful about and responsible for our interconnections with others locally and globally. Niebuhr writes about the relationship between anxiety and freedom quite poetically: “Anxiety, as a permanent concomitant of freedom, is thus both the source of creativity and a temptation to sin. It is



**Anxiety, as a permanent concomitant of freedom, is thus both the source of creativity and a temptation to sin. It is the condition of the sailor, climbing the mast (to use a simile), with the abyss of the waves beneath him and the “crow’s nest” above him. He is anxious about the end toward which he strives and the abyss of nothingness into which he may fall.**

*Reinhold Niebuhr*



the condition of the sailor, climbing the mast (to use a metaphor), with the abyss of the waves beneath him and the ‘crow’s nest’ above him. He is anxious about both the end toward which he strives and the abyss of nothingness into which he may fall.”<sup>12</sup> Like Niebuhr’s sailor, all of us and especially Christians are called to be reflective about how our anxiety affects our capacity for freedom, as well as to be thoughtful about how our anxiety limits the freedom of oth-

ers. To be sure, we can never understand freedom as pure agency, because every thought we have of it is encoded and shaped by our feelings and needs, as well as by the needs of others. I remember learning this early on as a divinity student and reading Roger Haight’s work on sin and grace. An important Catholic thinker of our time, Haight

explains that “there is no pure freedom,” as “each individual person is both free and unfree, free and determined.”<sup>13</sup> Emotions, including anxiety, are one of the dimensions of existence that affect our freedom. Realizing this allows us to make ethical decisions about what to wear and why we wear it. Fears about not being good enough could prevent us from trying new styles or could coerce us into adorning ourselves with certain products. We have to be vigilant about these effects if we want to have maximum engagement—freedom—in our lives.

Nevertheless, we cannot perform or enact a new sense of freedom alone. There is a whole global industry of capitalism, rife with designers, producers, manufacturers, and advertisers that influence what we wear and why we wear it. Are we truly free when we have been socialized from an early age to dress a certain way to be feminine or masculine? Are we really free when we have limited resources to acquire the clothing necessary to function in our schools or jobs? Are we really free when we want to buy shoes for our children and are paralyzed by not knowing where in China those shoes were made, who made them, and under what conditions?

To be sure, clothing ourselves is not a clear-cut process, and when we pause to think about it, our dress reveals how we are living out our anxieties in the best and worst of ways with limited resources as the negative patterns are cemented through social structures, including family, peer groups, industry, and the cult of celebrity. Struggling against negative patterns is not easy, and when we are faced with the challenge, the most radical solution may seem to be to overturn global capitalist social structures. However, for the ordinary person who is struggling to survive economically or emotionally, this may seem a

bit daunting. Some might also ponder where any of us would be without these global capitalist structures. After all, these structures enable many of us to have clothes and other resources necessary for everyday life, so getting beyond capitalism does not seem like the easiest or most appropriate response to our anxieties.

As this book unfolds, I am hoping we can find ways to struggle against the bad stress and negative patterns in concrete ways, moving toward an acknowledgment of and commitment to what is sometimes referred to as “implicated resistance.”<sup>14</sup> In working toward overcoming negative patterns related to what we wear and why we wear it, “[p]ersons of good faith do not stop being educated, stop being affluent, or stop bearing the particular privileged racial or ethnic system granted to them by the unjust system in which they live.”<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, they imagine creative ways of transforming society as they live in their social locations. Implicated resistance allows for some to work against injustice on behalf of others in the midst of struggling with their own privilege. The anxiety that humans experience in being created finite and being created in God’s image can spur wonder and personal and collective genius in all of us, regardless of our social contexts, to push ourselves to make a better world. Again, freedom is always “semiautonomous,” and in addition to it being complicated by one’s social status, there is a tendency to use freedom for personal gain.<sup>16</sup> This shadow side manifests when we use our freedom wittingly or unwittingly at the expense of others, when we adorn ourselves for our own achievement yet hurt other creatures in the process.<sup>17</sup> Seeing our interconnectedness and embracing our dependence on others is a good strategy for avoiding the shadow side of freedom.



This is a difficult point to get across, especially since many are conditioned by a sense of freedom for self and unbridled individualism. Thinking about my freedom in relation to that of another was never really part of my worldview, especially when I was growing up. I can recall that whenever anyone questioned my choices or complained about what I was doing, I would righteously and glibly state, “It’s a free country!” I am not sure how I got that notion, but am worried that while I do not consciously say it or think it as an adult, my adornment practices today say the same thing. As I negotiate my human frailty through my dress, at times I implicitly announce with that same indignation, “It’s my right and my prerogative!” That needs to be questioned. If anyone, including me, purchases clothing from manufacturers that are violating child labor codes, then perhaps we need to reevaluate our exercise and sense of freedom. If anyone, including me, publicly or privately condemns members of a religious group for what they wear, then perhaps we need to reevaluate our exercise and sense of freedom. In thinking through a spirituality of dress, we would do well to embrace a semiautonomous sense of freedom, one that values being intricately connected to others and thus responsible for them. This question of freedom and choice pushes us toward a conversation about sin. In the next chapter, I explore how sin emerges not so much in choosing this or that particular outfit, but rather in not paying attention to our stories about what we wear and why we wear it.