Sunday, March 13, 2011: Genesis 2:15-17

The serpent was right: when Eve and Adam ate the fruit, they did not die; they saw more clearly.

by Samuel Wells in the March 8, 2011 issue

If you've ever changed a diaper, you know that when the baby has a diaper removed, especially a cloth one, there's usually a rush of energy, often laughter, and a convulsion of kicking and rolling and sheer exultation in the freedom of having legs set free from the bondage of damp and sometimes soiled cloth. Babies have no problem with nakedness. It's a relief.

Children go on in much the same way for several years. Although tired and truculent at the end of the day, they may be transformed once the clothes are off for bath or bedtime, and mischievous imps awash in giggles find fun in fearless frenzy.

But then there comes a point, a year or two later, when they know they are naked. A host of complications begin to crowd in. For the last couple of generations, educators, psychologists and others have insisted that our lives and our societies would be better if we could somehow eradicate negative attitudes toward our bodies, the profound self-rejection and feelings of ugliness, unworthiness and repression that set in at about this age and are hard to shift. Parents hurl themselves headlong into righting the wrongs of their own upbringings and endeavor to ensure that the dial of their children's well-being is set in advance to "well-adjusted" by affirming nakedness and physicality and natural functions. But for all the wholesome psychology, the world these well-adjusted young people enter is as complex as ever.

The serpent was right: when Eve and Adam ate the fruit, they did not die; instead they saw more clearly. But it turned out that seeing more clearly wasn't really a blessing. Something did die: the joy of unself-consciousness. When Eve and Adam saw more clearly, what they saw was that they were naked. A few fig leaves and a hastily sewn loincloth didn't hide the fact that they were no longer at home in their bodies, at home with one another, at home in the garden and at home with God.

Today fig leaves have been replaced by cotton, silk, latex and satin. But some things haven't changed. Nakedness is still located in a triangle of meanings between vulnerability, sensuality and innocence. That's what happens when adolescence sets in: innocence is replaced by an uncomfortable mixture of sensuality and vulnerability—and vulnerability usually has the upper hand.

The mystique of sexual discovery is the fantasy of sensuality without vulnerability; that is the gnosticism of Friday night on a college campus or spring break at a beach resort. It's the notion that, at least for a limited time, the vulnerability of nakedness can be ignored and the sensuality of nakedness can fly on its own air.

A healthy marriage, by contrast, is one in which an intermingling of sensuality and vulnerability restores a kind of second innocence—a prelapsarian order in which seeing and knowing lead not to despising and rejecting but to cherishing and nurturing. (I use the phrase "second innocence" by analogy with the "second naïveté" that Paul Ricoeur and others speak of when they encourage a return to a reading of scriptural texts that is conscious of historical criticism but goes beyond it.)

By contrast, the loitering shadow of abuse arises when the vulnerability is exploited to become part of the sensuality, and it's exacerbated when innocence is an integral part of that vulnerability.

Meanwhile the two-steps-forward, one-step-back dance of the dating scene is a process of heightening anxiety that involves the hesitant or hurried disclosure and discovery of vulnerability, sensuality and innocence.

After the serpent has done its work, Eve and Adam find that their eyes "were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Innocence is gone; sensuality is suddenly suspect; the chill wind of vulnerability makes nakedness the symbol of mortality and fragility.

Later, Eve and Adam try to hide their nakedness as God ambles past, "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" (Gen. 3:8). How absurd to think that God's eyes too have only just now been opened, and that God notices their nakedness only when they begin to notice. But how human! Lent begins precisely here, when we realize the laughable absurdity of trying to hide our nakedness from God. For so long we've been skulking in the trees, and now we hear God's plaintive inquiry, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). Why on earth, when we have the perpetual invitation to walk with God, do we instead skulk in the trees? Because we realize we are naked? Do we

really think God doesn't already know that?

It takes the rest of Lent—perhaps longer, perhaps a lifetime of healing and self-acceptance—to realize that when God sees our nakedness, God is looking not just at our vulnerability, our foolishness, our fecklessness, our fragility—all the things we try to conceal with fig-leaved fumbling—but also at our innocence and our sensuality. By definition we cannot see our own innocence, and those who claim to are simply charlatans. But God sees it and calls us into a second innocence of walking again in the evening breeze. In contrast we can see our own sensuality—but God sees it more than we do, and if we desire or are desired by another, it is only a window onto how profoundly and comprehensively we are desired by God.

Lent begins with our nakedness, but ends with Christ's. It is his naked vulnerability on the tree that restores our naked innocence.