

## Feeling comfortable in (only) my skin

by Klaus Huber

Cycling without any clothes through the City of Bristol as part of the World Naked Bike Ride was a truly exhilarating experience (although a bit chilly). It made me wonder why the dress code 'nothing at all' isn't usually acceptable at other times. As I write, summer has finally arrived, and it's a great feeling to be lying in the sun, surrounded by a gentle breeze. Unfortunately, if I want that gentle breeze to cool my *entire* body, I have to find myself a hiding place, without really understanding why. I can't think of any rational explanation why a certain part of my body ought to be covered from other people's sight. Surely the sight of several dozen naked people doesn't appear to have done any harm to the thousands of onlookers during the Naked Bike Ride, most of whom kept cheering and found it great fun.

I must confess that earlier on in my life, the mere idea of my cycling naked through a city would have been unimaginable. Indoctrinated by our Roman Catholic village priest, at the age of 9 I forbade my parents to enter the bathroom while I was having a bath. Ten years later, I turned down an invitation to enter a (German) sauna, considering it a place of immorality - and besides, I felt very uncomfortable about exposing my 'inadequate' body to anyone else.

German Young Friends soon set me off on a rapid journey from prude to naturist: inspired by their non-prudish attitudes and safeguarded by mutual trust, respect, and friendship, my inhibitions gradually crumbled, and the last remainder of the village priest's indoctrination vanished when I stripped off at a naturist beach for the first time at the age of 24.

I have since found naturism to offer a good reflection of the Quaker testimonies. Our birthday suit is the simplest outfit, it comes for free and is easier to clean than clothes. When we remove our clothes, most differences in social status, profession and wealth become invisible. Being naked gives us a sense of integrity, as we don't cover up, disguise or mask any part of ourselves. It also prevents us from hiding any weapons. The vulnerability that comes with a state of nakedness is one of the reasons why naturists don't pass judgment on their own or other people's bodies: everyone is accepted exactly the way they are - an attitude that, in my experience, often extends to non-physical aspects as well.

Leaving body shame behind felt to me like being cured from a deep-rooted mental illness (known as a social norm because the majority of society are still suffering from it). I just wished more people could be cured from it.

PS. A video of the Bristol Naked Bike Ride 2012 is at <http://bristolwnbr.blogspot.co.uk/>



## Genesis of an article

The above article was first published in the Redland Quaker Meeting newsletter in August 2012. The picture, featuring Fran and myself, went with it. Fran, also a Quaker, was, for several years, on the organising group of the Naked Bike Rides in Bristol. When I suggested to her to submit the picture to the newsletter, she readily gave her permission to do so, but never expected it to be accepted for publication.

Most of the article was written much earlier. My original inspiration for the piece was my experience of modelling for a photography student in November 2010. Hannah Sampson, who studied photography at the University of the West of England, came around to my place to take nearly 200 photos of me with a digital SLR as part of a project on 'naturists at home'. The very next day, I wrote the first draft of *Feeling comfortable in (only) my skin*. About a week later, I sent the article to *The Friend*, the Quaker weekly magazine read by thousands of Quakers (and others) in and beyond Britain. With Hannah's permission, I also included the following three photos she had taken of me, suggesting to the editor to use the caption "The author at home, photographed by Hannah Sampson" and added "The word (extract) to be added if a picture is cropped."



The article, in its December 2010 version for *The Friend*, started as follows:

"I recently became an object of study. Photography student Hannah Sampson visited me in my flat to take pictures of me performing my normal daily activities, such as making a cup of tea, sitting at my computer, practising the guitar, and relaxing with a glass of wine and a pipe. It sounds very unspectacular. The twist was that her project was about naturists; and being a naturist, I usually perform these daily activities without wearing any clothes (subject to room temperature! As I write this, my flat's temperature is 13 degrees C, and I'm in full winter outfit). So after a few minutes of introducing ourselves, I took off my bathrobe and remained in my birthday suit for the following one and a half hours, while Hannah conversed with me about naturism and kept clicking away on



her camera. Helped by Hannah's respect and sincerity, the fact that I was naked in front of a young woman I had never met before didn't bother me at all. Quite the opposite: the photo shoot became a liberating experience, as I felt accepted for who I am, in my entirety, literally without having to cover up any part of myself.

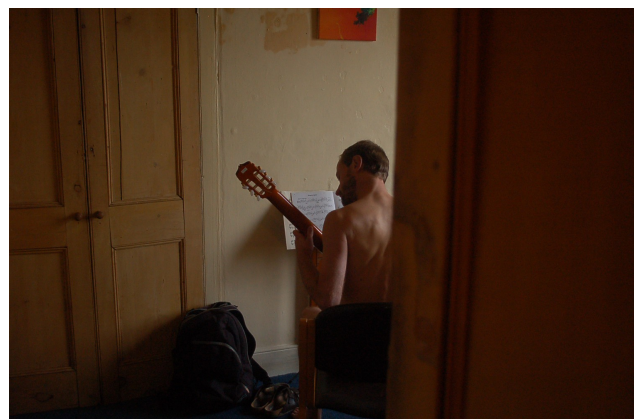
I must confess that earlier on in my life, the nonchalance with which I cast off my bathrobe on that day would have been unimaginable."

The rest was largely the same as the version published in 2012.

The editor of *The Friend*, Ian Kirk-Smith, found my piece suitable for publication. In April 2011, he told me that he had commissioned an article on early Quakers going naked for a sign and was intending to publish my article alongside this commissioned piece. In the end, nothing came out of it though. Hence I re-wrote part of the article in Summer 2012 for publication in the Redland Quaker Meeting newsletter. This newsletter was also sent to *The Friend* (as is the case for many local Quaker Meeting newsletters). Lo and behold, the newsletter editor received a request from *The Friend* for permission to reprint my article. But hey ho, nothing came out of this either.

Despite my piece never appearing in *The Friend*, the entire episode left me with quite positive feelings. As naturists, we are often reluctant to write for non-naturist publications (let alone to send them photos), thinking that they would never want to publish our articles or photos anyway. And yet, *The Friend* took my submission quite seriously - certainly there was no feeling of my article or photos being considered offensive or unsuitable - and the Quaker Meeting newsletter readily published a photo featuring Fran's bare breasts, without any questions asked (other than getting her permission). It reinforces my view that, as naturists, we are often guilty of self-censorship and that positive surprises may be in store for us when we become more open.

*More photos by Hannah Sampson (November 2010)*





*Bristol Naked Bike Rides 2013-2016*



2013



2014





2015



2016

*Nude self-portraits 2018*



*Nude self-portraits 2024*

