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### GOING NAKED AT BURNING MAN

By Diana B.  
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**M**any years ago I had heard about the crazy drug-fest in the desert, where people run wild and for some reason they burn a big fake guy. At that point I dismissed the notion of going, knowing that my life was crazy enough and that I feared the uncertainty that this festival represented.

This year, however, as I am enjoying a period of unprecedented personal growth, I made a spot-decision to attend. After some friends had mentioned they were headed that way, I heard a small intuitive voice tell me that I too was going to go. And I soon realized that I was headed out there with one main mission:

To get naked.

Now for many people this would be a non-issue, nakedness for them being something that they've experienced and enjoyed during a lifetime of self-love and unself-consciousness. But for me it's quite a different thing. I was socialized as a female, to begin with, and with that comes an unhealthy dose of body loathing. It's just part of the territory.

Plus I was a fat kid, and fat periodically in later life, so I have a double sense of the inadequacy of my natural form.

But thanks to feminist theory, loving lovers and friends, group therapy, spiritual growth, I am in the process of rejecting crippling feelings of self-hatred. Last Spring I spoke on the topic at USC and culminated the talk by showing the audience two separate pictures of my naked breasts, one marked "before" and one "after." The only difference between the shots was that I have decided to love the identical "after" breasts just as they are rather than alter them surgically to look like the pictures of other women's augmented breasts that I had exhibited throughout the lecture.

Look how brave and in touch I am, I crowed afterwards to a friend. Well, ahem, he said, don't take this wrong, but, you aren't really in touch with your body if it's projected up on a screen high above you during an academic lecture. It's a way of avoiding intimacy. With yourself. You need to get in touch with your vulnerability.

Well shit. He's right, I guess. I knew this because I resented him for saying so, and that's usually a clear sign that I am in some kind of denial. So while giving myself credit for what was in fact a courageous act on my part, I also have been open to being even more vulnerable, whatever that might mean.

Enter Burning Man 2005! Here's a good opportunity to seek self and stretch. Maybe I could let some lady body paint me. That was my wildest hope for the trip. Maybe then I would feel secure enough, under the protective coloration of Max Factor, to tool around in front of total strangers. I doubted it, but thought I would be open at least to the possibility.

Oh, yes, I should mention that it was my intention to do this cold sober. It wouldn't really count if I were trashed, would it? I am talking about actually being present in my life, in my body, so drugs and alcohol could not be part of the equation. There's no feelings of vulnerability experienced in a blackout.

After the long and uneventful drive up from Los Angeles, I arrived Monday evening. Upon first seeing Black Rock City, I stared to panic, wondering what in the hell I had gotten myself into. I then found myself offering up this prayer: "help me to be the best me I can be, and let that help others be their best them." This clarified my role, and after finding camp and setting up my tent, I made friends with a wonderful woman named Mary who generously led me on a nighttime tour of the wonders of this isolated and art-drenched world. I knew I had made the right decision in coming. At one point we entered a meditation space, housed in a submerged human head and lighted inside by a fireplace in the center out of which a copper cobra coiled. Kneeling down, I grew quiet and listened, submerged in the chanting, dizzy with incense. Almost immediately I again heard that internal voice: "You get to start all over again," it said. "And this time you get to be exactly who you are."

Tuesday morning dawned bright and sunny (it is the desert after all). Feeling great, I put on a bikini top and a skirt and rode off on my bike to survey the theme camps. What a clever bunch of folks gather for this ritual. And what an amazing amount of resources they generously donate to amuse and delight us all. My senses were constantly activated. Reaching the edge of the encampment, I had a sudden naughty urge to go topless. After all, I was way out past most people, and to my right, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretched far away. So looking around for prying eyes, and seeing none, I pulled off my top and hopped back tentatively onto my bike.

I continued around the perimeter, feeling free and excited. I also eventually knew it wouldn't count if no one else saw me, so taking the plunge, I rode into the center, steadily realizing that nobody gives a fuck and I need to get over myself.

The first person I encountered was a drunken young man who said "lemme talk to this gorgeous woman." Before I could react he placed beads around my neck and a sloppy kiss on my mouth.

This was going to be easier than I had expected. But I also felt conflicted at being viewed as some man's object and kissed against my will. This was going to be more complicated than I expected as well.

After the morning's outing, I grew quite comfortable with being topless both in and out of camp, but had no intention of going further. Tits are one thing. No clothes whatsoever, quite another. I simply was not brave enough to do this, though other women—not many—were. The rest of us preferred to manage our appearances with various accoutrement.

One morning I awoke filled with anger, loathing myself and others. Eventually recognizing this as the need to grieve, camouflaged by safe and more familiar emotions, I rode off as usual to do the Hokey Pokey dance with a bunch of other goofballs, wondering when, if, and where the tears would come. I often find it difficult to allow myself to surrender to pain. But on the way back across the desert, it happened. Sobs began spilling out of me. Where will I cry? I wondered frantically, since I was far from the temple, a logical place to mourn.

Just then, ahead through the blowing sand, I spied a tiny shrine. Yes, a tiny shrine. Pyramid in shape, made of scrolls each ending in a peace sign and/or cross, it sat about 3 feet high and was flanked with two large candles. I dropped the bike, hit the dirt, and began to wail.

What was I grieving? Same thing we all have for millennia. Loss and change, loss and change. Death, separation, rejection, fear, the past, the future, me, you. The tears came convulsively, and then that kind intuitive voice in my head said "take off all your clothes."

I obeyed.

My god and I were together at that moment, me naked without any social pretense, without any desires but those of the universe, without any chemicals. I trust you, I sobbed. I hear you. I believe. I know you led me here. I am yours.

It was the most intense spiritual connection I have ever experienced. I felt my god, big time.

As I sat there weeping, I noticed a man ride by on his bike, slowly, looking back over his shoulder towards me as he passed by. Oh please go away, I thought. This is not about you. He rode on and I relaxed and continued to enjoy the moment I was having, the moment that I came to Burning Man—10 hours from home, all by myself—to have.

A while later he returned. “Hi,” said. “Would you mind if I took a picture? It’s just so,” here he paused, “beautiful.” The word finally dropped, pillow-soft. And I had a decision to make.

I searched inside, for the discomfort, the violation, the objectification, the anger. There was none. This was my private moment, my private spiritual naked holy magical moment. And I did not mind that someone else found it lovely. For he simply could not take away from me what I was experiencing, not with his eyes, or his camera, or his desire. The power the male gaze had always held over me was dead. And in its place rose an ability to enjoy the fact that my self, my naked beautiful physical self, gave other people pleasure, and most importantly that this pleasing of others was not the reason that I exist.

What a fucking gift. Just recalling this moment moves me to tears, for after this epiphany I have been able to negotiate my relationship with the world, and with my own body, without feeling defensive or insecure. I’m home in my physical self. The burden of sexism has been lifted. My spirit and my flesh are one. I have survived the mind/body split, foisted on us westerners by an insecure Descartes and the crazy male misogynist Christians who preceded him.

While it was not my intention after this episode to appear naked before anyone but my god, and I put my skirt back on before I rode away, as the days passed I slowly found myself more willing to take off all of my clothes, first to do some naked yoga in front of my tent after a cooling shower (it just seemed right), then to commune with my wonderful safe companions in camp, and finally to stroll across the playa, lounge luxuriously on colorful pillows in the Winking Lotus, expose myself to thousands of strangers, knowing that no matter what I saw in their eyes, none of them could take anything away from me that I did not want to give. Including, especially, my self-esteem. For I finally felt sure that no matter what they saw, the only opinion I cared about was my own. And thanks to an intense spiritual connection to the universe, I love me, body and soul.

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