

The Vintage Voice

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An Essay on Thin Skin *(or how to like it if you have it)*

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Gwendolyn and I were taking some trash cans out to the curb the other evening, when I suddenly noticed a deluge of blood pouring down my hand and onto my fingers.

All right, it wasn't exactly a deluge of blood, and it wasn't pouring per se; but something had happened, and there was a rivulet of blood on the back of my hand. All right again, perhaps rivulet is too strong a word, since the word derives from the French meaning a *small river*. Point is, my hand was bleeding for some reason, even if it was a very small stream.

Back in the house, I went to the kitchen and placed my hand under cold running water. The bleeding stopped immediately without the need of a tourniquet or further stanching with a paper towel. Blood pressure appeared to be normal, and I was relieved.

I asked Gwendolyn if she thought I needed to go to the emergency room, and she said no.

I asked her if she thought we should call 911 and have the paramedics come by and take a look, and she said no.

I asked her if she thought I needed stitches, and she said no.

I asked her if she thought I needed either a splint or a sling, and she said no.

I asked her if she thought I needed a dressing for the wound, and she said, "Would you prefer French or Thousand Island?" Sometimes it's hard to get sympathy from Gwendolyn.

I said, "I was thinking of a dressing like a bandage," and again she said no . . . "They don't make Band-Aids that small."

Composing myself, I looked down to examine the wound, and discovered to my surprise that it was nothing more than a very small skin tear that had occurred near a blood vessel. Thank goodness for the gift of rapid clotting (I had eaten calves liver twice the previous week, so I was fortified with iron and other good stuff).

I don't recall ever having had a skin tear before. On occasion I had seen them on the very elderly, but at seventy, I didn't see myself in that category quite yet; but as we get older our skin gets thinner and we become more susceptible to tears like the one I had experienced.

Over the years I've come to know a lot of people who I thought were thin-skinned, especially in the area of politics, religion, or in-laws; but for me to be physically thin-skinned is something new.

Related to all of this, I've made it a practice to see my dermatologist annually just for a routine check over.

On my last visit I asked her to take a look at a small suspicious growth on my forearm. As a standard precautionary measure, she wanted to excise the tissue and have a biopsy made just to be on the safe side. I agreed wholeheartedly, since I've had this kind of procedure done a number of times in the past. It's quick and painless. We seniors committed a lot of sun sins when we were younger and such sun sins tend to manifest themselves later, sometimes in very benign ways, sometimes in ways not-so-benign. In either case, it's always a good idea to check it out.

As my good doctor prepared to make the incision, she bunched up the skin on my arm between her thumb and forefinger and started to tell me how much she liked working on the skin of older patients. She said it's because the skin on older patients is more elastic and stretches easier. I recall she used a few more descriptors such as *pliable*, *flexible*. Thin skin is easier to cut with a scalpel and easier to stitch closed, unlike the skin of younger patients, which is firm and well-toned.

Reflecting later on what my dermatologist had said, I took it as something of a compliment. It's good to be pliable and flexible, following the example of one's skin.

And I've had another revelation about the wondrous nature of thin skin. Over the years we priests get to see a lot of different kinds of hands at the altar rail. I became very fond of looking at the hands of the very elderly, especially the hands of men and women in their eighties and nineties. Their hands are oftentimes delicate-looking anyway, and they tell wonderful stories of service and ministry. When people get to such advanced years, the skin on their hands can become very thin indeed, so much so that their hands appear to be translucent. It's as if one can look right through their skin and see all the beautiful anatomy of the hand. "Translucent" is a wonderful word, coming from the Latin *translucere*, meaning *shining through*. I believe our thin skin has a lesson for the soul.

And now you know about the thin skin of us seniors. No, it might not be as attractive as some examples of younger skin, but if your eyes still work and you can see it, be grateful!

And by the way, the biopsy report came back with benign results, and I'm truly thankful for that. The doctor told me in advance that I would be left with a small scar. And that's all right too, because the scars on our skin can tell wonderful stories.



Bob and his wife Gwendolyn live in the Tampa Bay area of Florida. He retired in 2010 after forty-three years in the active ministry. In addition to being a parish priest, he has written often in the past for various magazines and journals (*Forward Day by Day*, *The Living Church*) and is now enjoying the new field of being an essayist.