

A Soldier's Kidneys

Brian Abel Ragen

I have never found it easy to pee in the presence of others. For years this urinary shyness has made me most uncomfortable during the intermissions of concerts and ballgames. The single stall is always occupied by someone with tormented bowels—or perhaps by someone with a case of bashful kidneys still worse than mine—so I find myself standing elbow to elbow with a procession of three or four loose-sphinctered guys who have all let their streams fly before I have been able to produce a drop. I try visualizing waterfalls and open spigots, but it's not much help. Half the time I give up with a full bladder, and spend the next hour wondering if it is true, as I have heard, that Tyco Brahe, the great astronomer, died of a burst bladder because he was too polite to excuse himself while at a banquet with the King of Prussia.

If you judged only on the basis of the design of public men's rooms, you would think that I am the only man with this problem. (How often I have envied women their stalls!—let them complain about lines as much as they please.) But I know I am not alone. I have science to reassure me. One of my friends in college took a course in what was called “Environmental Psychology.” His textbook described an experiment on the concept of “personal space,” which tested the hypothesis that if a man's personal space is violated while he is attempting to urinate, the onset of urination will be delayed and the duration will be lessened. Every man to whom I have described this experiment has responded with the same words: “I could have told him that.” The researcher, an R. Dennis Middlemist of Oklahoma State University, nevertheless set out to prove it. He applied to the doings in the public men's room the same method that allows Nova to show us wolf-cubs being suckled: a duck blind. Disguising his periscope in a pile of books, he hid in a stall and focused the scientific eye on men innocently going about their business at the urinals and used a stop-watch to record their performance. Like all great experiments, this one was carefully controlled: A fellow researcher was employed to enter the personal space of the would-be pee-er. Sometimes he would station himself at the most distant

urinal; sometimes he would take the one right next to the victim—that is, the subject—of the experiment. Since men left alone did in fact pee faster and longer than those who were not, the hypothesis was proved. Professor Middlemist is clearly not the sort of person one would like to know, but I feel a sort of grudging admiration for him. All academics long for more publications, but few have the gall to get one by annoying strangers in a bathroom.

Even before science—in the form of Professor Middlemist and his periscope—addressed the problem, I had read about bashful kidneys. As a teenager, I regularly studied the medical advice column in our local paper. (I enjoyed it most when the questions were about diseases I could not possibly have: maybe an ectopic pregnancy or a nice case of beriberi.) One day the troubled seeker of advice was a young man who had been drafted. Since this was at the height of the Vietnam War, one might have thought that the medical problems occupying his mind would have been jungle rot or shrapnel wounds. But they were not. He was worried about having to pee in front of other recruits during basic training. The newspaper doctor offered words of comfort: you have this problem because your mother mishandled your toilet-training, and the drill sergeant, assisted perhaps by an Army psychiatrist, will help you get over it. If the draftee was hoping to hear that his bashful bladder would keep him out of Nam, he was disappointed.

I had visited enough barracks while in the Boy Scouts to know that the letter-writer's fears were not unfounded. Whenever our troop was the guest of the Army or Marines, we found huge latrines in which stalls even around the commodes were unheard of luxuries. The Army clearly intended to cultivate future recruits when they had us on base, but I think the latrines probably erased the good impression made by the mess halls. A Boy Scout can skulk around until he finds a moment when the latrine is deserted, but clearly a recruit does not have that option. The army cuts off your privacy about the same time they take your hair. Perhaps the drill instructors do all this for a good reason—I suppose recruits may need to be prepared for the primitive sanitation of the battlefield—but it is certainly also part of their larger effort to break down the individuality. A few stalls could hardly do much damage to the readiness of a modern army.

It is in part because of the unsatisfactory lavatory arrangements that I decided against a military career, despite all the attractions of uniforms, medals, ranks, titles, the pomp and circumstance of glorious war—even the romantic idea serving one’s country. The chance of death and dismemberment—even the certainty of a martinet in a smoky bear hat calling me names for weeks—was nothing compared to the prospect of not being able to pee for months at a time. The army was clearly for the loose-sphinctered, and not for me.

Michel de Montaigne evidently agreed that a soldier should not have bashful kidneys. In his essay “Our Feelings Reach Out Beyond Us,” Montaigne describes how the Emperor Maximilian would “hide to make water, as scrupulous as a virgin not to uncover, either to a doctor or to anyone else whatever, the parts that are customarily kept hidden.” (Montaigne thinks the emperor took the bashfulness too far when he ordered that he be dressed in under-drawers before being wrapped in his shroud.) More strikingly, he says “I, who am so bold-mouthed, am nevertheless by nature affected by this shame. Except under great stress of necessity. . . I hardly communicate to the sight of anyone the members and acts that our custom orders us to cover up. I suffer from more constraint in this than I consider becoming to a man, and especially to a man of my profession.” Every translation I have seen footnotes that line. The editors must explain that Montaigne “considered his profession to be that of a soldier.”

How could Montaigne think soldiering was his profession? His profession was exploring himself and reporting his discoveries in good French prose. He never spent much time on campaign, and if he was a soldier, it was only one of many roles: magistrate, lord of the manor, even mayor of Bordeaux. Yet of all those roles, he defined himself by the one that seems least natural to him: He avoided taking sides in civil strife, he distrusted passionate devotion to causes, he tried to see every side of every issue, he valued his privacy, and avoided risking his life without good reason. But still we discover that Montaigne thought of himself as a warrior by profession and regretted that he could not piss like a trooper. We cannot help being surprised. We are almost as surprised when Samuel Johnson, a man who showed just how much courage can be displayed in civil life, says “Every man thinks worse of himself for not having been a

soldier.” The surprise comes for the usual reason in Johnson: he has spoken the truth and not wrapped it up in qualifications. Almost every man, even the most pacifist, does think worse of himself for not having been a soldier. Mohandas Ghandi himself could not reject the idea that to be a warrior was his true profession: “I am a soldier,” the Mahatma declared, “but a soldier of peace.” The men who seem least likely to be seduced by dreams of glory still dally with them somewhere deep in their hearts.

Rudyard Kipling loved soldiers. His early works are celebrations of the virtues that make a good officer—daring, pluck, intelligence—or lamentations of the lot of the common soldier. But he himself, a near-sighted, nervous man, never served. Except for one brief instance in the Boer War, he never saw battle firsthand. But Kipling clearly had imagined what the lot of a man with bashful kidneys might be in the trenches. During the First World War—the war that took the life of his only son—Kipling wrote a series of epitaphs. Like the epitaphs of the ancient Greeks, Kipling’s are often in the voice of the dead. One is for “The Refined Man”:

I was of delicate mind. I stepped aside for my needs
Disdaining the common office. I was seen from afar and killed.
How is this a matter for mirth? Let each be judged by his deeds.
I have paid my price to live with myself on the terms that I willed.

That epitaph will never take the place of the one on the Spartans at Thermopylae in the anthologies, but it has a certain power. Anyone who demands to live life on his own terms pays a price, and, as Kipling recognized, the price is often out of all proportion to the terms we demand. It often seems almost as high as the one paid by Kipling’s refined man. The price is just as likely to be exacted on a commodity others find laughably trivial as on one they, too, would pay top dollar for: a moment of decent privacy can cost as much as a moment of desperate glory. The ghost of the soldier shot down while trying to preserve some area of privacy and decorum even in the trenches speaks for many of us. But since Kipling has given him the stoical voice of the old epitaphs, he can do so without grumbling, as we might, that the price is far too high.

A zone of privacy is central to civilized life, even if we are not always willing to pay what it costs to preserve it. The sort of privacy that those of us with bashful kidneys need is just a part of something larger. Privacy and reserve are what make us free men and not something else—yet they are less and less respected in our culture. Those who violate our reserve always see us as something less than independent human beings. The salesman, who always calls us by our first name and, if desperate enough for his commission, will continue his pitch even at the urinal, sees us not as free men, but as marks. The scientists and social engineers, like Professor Middlemist, see us as specimens, hardly more to be respected than a colony of ants observed and prodded under glass. The public nannies, in the form of employers and governments, who sometimes ask that we fill their specimen cups to make sure we have not been naughty and played with the wrong toys, see us as children. And the tyrants, who sometimes appear in the form of the drill instructor, see us as tools. None see us as responsible, adult creatures with a right to a realm of privacy not to be invaded without the best of reasons. C.S. Lewis saw Montaigne as the voice of the free man, “the voice of a man with his legs under his own table, eating the mutton and turnips raised on his own land.” The voice, in other words, of the man who can shut the bathroom door if he pleases. If there is anything worth defending—any civil ideal that could on rare occasions justify the romance of soldiering—it is a world where all are free, where men with bashful kidneys can pee in privacy.

Brian Abel Ragen, Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, can be contacted at inquiries@brianableragen.net. He retains copyright to this essay.