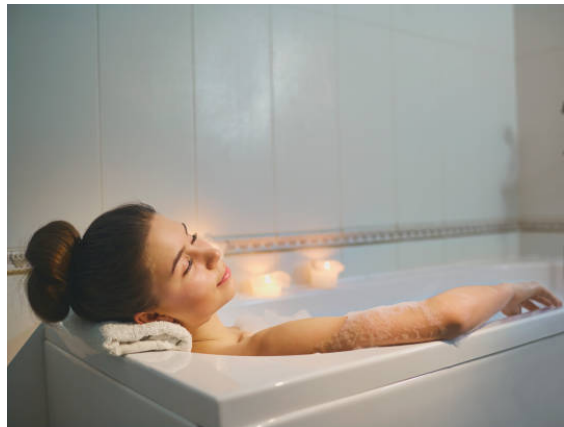




What is Clean?

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I recently read a book written by an M.D. who hadn't taken a wash in five years. I read the review of his book *Clean*, and was intrigued. As many of you may know, the skin is our largest organ. We spend many thousands of dollars in our lifetime cleansing, primping, and otherwise caring for our skin. The book's author questions how much, if any of it, is necessary or healthy.



“Five years ago, I stopped showering. At least, by most modern definitions of the word. I still get my hair wet occasionally, but I quit shampooing or conditioning, or using soap, except on my hands. I also gave up the other personal care products—exfoliants and moisturizers and deodorants—that I had always associated with being clean.”

— *Clean: The New Science of Skin* by James Hamblin

Now, he did this as an experiment, and to minimize his hygiene routine while changing careers from doctor to writer. He received a lot of negative response from family and friends, but decided it was a worthy experiment— plus he'd save a great deal of money and time.

“What if I actually got fewer colds, and my skin looked better, and I found other, better routines and rituals? What if all those products in

our bathrooms—shampoos to remove oils from our hair, and conditioners to replace them; soaps to remove oils from our skin, and moisturizers to replace them—were mostly effective in getting us to buy more products? How do you really know if you’ve never gone more than a couple days without them?”

“That basic philosophy made me only more curious about the money and time we collectively invest in skin care—and the standards that define what’s acceptable. Many of these can be traced to an industry that has, for the past two hundred years, sold us promises of health, happiness, beauty, and all manner of acceptance based on literally superficial fixes. And so I ended up on a multiyear journey through the history and science of soap, deconstructing the fortunes, products, and belief systems it has spawned, from the “soap boom” of the nineteenth century right up to the modern skin care industry. After talking to microbiologists, allergists, geneticists, ecologists, estheticians, bar-soap enthusiasts, venture capitalists, historians, Amish people, international aid workers, and a few straight-up scam artists, I came to believe that we are at the beginning of a dramatic shift in the basic conception of what it means to be clean.”

I, like so many other people that I know (particularly women), have a literal closet full of body, face, and hair products. If I tried to add up the cost of what’s sitting in my closet, it would probably be in the thousands of dollars. Don’t judge me. I bet if you did the same you would come up with a similar number.

An Experiment

This may be a little shocking, but after reading the book and digesting the history of soap and other hygiene products that were sold primarily to avoid disease— and later taken on by commercial manufacturers in order to sell us more stuff—well past any connection to illness, I thought, “Well, I’m in quarantine— what’s the worst that could happen? Maybe I’ll get a few pimples, or my skin will look oily or I’ll get itchy, but probably nothing terrible will happen— and if it does, it probably won’t show up on Zoom.” So what the heck. . .

I didn’t stop showering; I just stopped using soap when I showered. I used hot water and a skin brush, and at times a little salt to exfoliate but that’s it. And as far as I can tell I don’t smell, my skin looks better than it ever has (well, better than it has since I’ve started getting wrinkly), and I think was aided in my understanding process by finding

a parallel situation of recent years. Dr. Hamblin talks about it in the book, but I wanted to share my “ah ha” moment.

All of a sudden at the turn of the 21st-century we started talking about the “gut biome:” how we need to have certain bacteria living in our intestines. These “bugs” help us digest food, process waste, and even fight off disease. Decades before this it would’ve been an absurd idea. But now it’s a standard recommendation for me, and many traditional healthcare professionals to routinely suggest probiotics. Probiotics are, well, bugs in a bottle. Without a healthy gut biome, our immune system can go wacky— it even affects our mental health in that serotonin receptors in our bowel become compromised.

Again, had I written this paragraph years ago, it would’ve seemed like nonsense. But we have come to accept, understand, and research it. We’re even talking about curing horrible diseases like C. diff with fecal implants. Did you ever think you’d hear of a doctor talking about putting somebody else’s poop in someone’s body as a cure for a serious disease?

So, is it really so weird to think that most of the bugs that live on our skin need to be there? Perhaps we need them to help us slough off dead skin, and protect us against invaders by eating them or otherwise holding onto their turf. That we need this natural skin barrier— ideally unaltered by continual use of soap etc.— to create an environment in which our body can protect us from the outside world. The specifics of which we are just beginning to sort out. We know there are immune functions of the bugs, they give off protective pheromones, and much much more will be discovered as this book becomes well read and other more formal research occurs.

We are currently living in a world of mega hand sanitizer usage. But before COVID-19 there was a movement to stop using antibacterial soaps because they were killing off the good microbes as well as the bad guys. People were getting skin and other infections more easily because “anti bacterial” soaps were being pushed as necessary. I think all discussion has gotten shelved for the moment, but once we are through this pandemic it will be back on the table as an issue to be researched and discussed. I am certainly using hand sanitizer quite often, and would never suggest we should not wash our hands when needed, but I only sanitizers with alcohol, thyme or other plant oils, which in the scale of things are much less harmful to our skin biome than some of the other chemicals on the market.

“As the scope and intensity of global cleaning practices has escalated, we’ve been oblivious to their effects on the trillions of microbes that live on our skin. Scientists are only now learning just how these microbes influence processes throughout our bodies. The vast majority of our skin microbes seem to be not simply harmless but important to the skin’s function and, so, to the functioning of our immune systems. The skin microbiome represents a new and important reason to reconsider much of the received wisdom about soap and skin care, and to think deliberately about the daily habits many of us undertake in pursuit of health or well-being. The skin and its microbiome are the interface between our bodies and the natural world. Our microbes are partly us and partly not. Our growing understanding of this complex, diverse ecosystem has the potential to completely change how we think about the barrier between ourselves and our environments. This book, in the end, is an invitation to embrace the complexity of the world around us and on our skin. Even if you don’t stop showering.”

Skin in the Game

OK, so where does this leave us? Truthfully, I’ll still go for my monthly facials once the pandemic is over. Not only do I really enjoy the pampering, but I look better afterwards. There are some skin products that I will continue to use; even without showering, as I get older parts of my body are just drier. I’ll probably use some moisturizers around my eyes and on my limbs. These are places where I get a lot of sun and cold and they just dry out. But I think I’ll be giving up the usage of strong cleansers, especially soaps for my face. A nice cream moisturizer will take off the make up or dirt and not mess with my skin’s natural barriers.

I know this might sound like a women-centered discussion, but honestly, pretty much all this applies to you guys also. There is a great growing market trying to get you to focus more on the way you should smell, and the soaps you should use, and the things you should be putting on your face and body. In fact, the market for men’s skin care products had grown exponentially.

So what I’d like you to think about is doing a little experiment for yourself. We might as well use the pandemic to our benefit. Even if you are out there working, you’re not getting very close to anyone. . . . When you run out of your facial cleanser, see what happens if you just use a little moisturizer on a soft towel. Try washing your hair less frequently by just running it under hot water in the

shower and scrubbing it with your hands (a tip on that: if you brush vigorously before showering, you will move a lot of the oil from your scalp onto your hair shafts). And so on.

I think that over the next months and years discussions of the skin biome will be as common as those of the gut biome. I've already seen a dirt facial spray that is said to have probiotics in it... If any of you have the nerve to try that, let me know.

Namaste,

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