

## **Eat Dirt!**

Dirt is good for you. Babies know this; that's why they eat it. Parents don't know this; that's why their babies grow up with asthma and allergies.

All right, that statement oversimplifies matters and produces toxic levels of guilt. Still, the scientists believe we may be committing hygienicide, scrubbing ourselves not only silly but sick as well.

Consider the "hygiene hypothesis." It states that our immune systems enter the world as blank software and that worms and germs act to program it. A bored immune system is a dangerous immune system. It takes to attacking its own body. That, some scientists say, is why developed countries see skyrocketing levels of autoimmune diseases like diabetes, asthma and allergies.

And you can't get clean anyway. Your standard-issue human body plays host to somewhere in the neighborhood of ninety trillion microbes. Most are harmless and some, like those who inhabit the digestive tract, actually produce helpful nutrients.

The experts recommend a via media between being filthy and finicky. Teach your children to wash their hands before they eat, but let 'em run around barefoot in the dirt. Let the kid have a dog, too: the animal will provide companionship, a sense of responsibility, and some really nifty intestinal worms.

Jesus encountered both extremes in the spirituality of his day. The Gadarene demoniac took things too far; inviting invasive demonic microbes into his inner man and wallowing in the filth of the graveyard. But the Pharisees erred to the same extent in the other direction, with their OCD hand washing, scrubbing every dish to within an inch of its life. Jesus, by contrast, was willing to eat without a surgical scrubbing and to touch the dead and diseased. He hung out with wormy tax collectors and jump-started his antibodies to such an extent that his sanctity itself became catching. His

wholistic holiness seems to have activated the world's only fully-functioning spiritual immune system to such an extent that he flawlessly fought off the contagion of sin for his entire life.

Christians believe sin is bad. We're right about that. Problem is, we often get it into our heads that the only way to fight sin is to avoid it. Could be that our presence among the impure is the very thing that strengthens us to stay clean.

The crusty old Curé de Torcy, the Yoda of George Bernanos' novel *The Diary of a Country Priest*, tells the story of a cleaning woman so determined to keep the church building pure that she scrubbed herself into a fatal case of pneumonia. "The mistake she made wasn't to fight dirt, sure enough," the old priest pronounces, "but to try to do away with it altogether."

So fight spiritual dirt and disease today; fight them hard. Just remember that the best way to do that might be a barefoot stroll through a leper colony.

Cleaning Up My Act,

Doug