

WHY PRIVACY?

by Vic Berecz

Back in December, I wrote that “we’ve given up privacy for better lives.” Since then, I’ve heard a half dozen other ways we Americans have abdicated any expectation of privacy we may have once had. I’m still absolutely convinced we took on this state-of-affairs willingly, though somewhat unknowingly.

But, this *The Lockhorns* cartoon in our local newspaper recently reopened the question in my mind of why so many of us still feel privacy is important. I’m afraid that my answer of “I can think of only two reasons why anyone would object [to their loss of privacy]: either they are slackers or tax-cheats” was too flippant ... and I’m not talking about privacy in ones own home, whether bedroom, bathroom, or elsewhere.

One of the major reasons people desire privacy is to hide things they’re not proud of ... and these *do* include failing to “earn your keep” on the job and introducing creative writing to Form 1040s. But, there are also lots of other things we all wish to hide ... unkind treatment of family or friends ... bad habits, like drinking too much ... physical flaws we sometimes hide with makeup or cosmetic surgery.

In today’s society, there is an all-consuming fascination with the personal foibles of others. It began with public figures like entertainers, sports stars, and politicians ... don’t we all know too much about David Letterman, Tiger Woods, and Mark Sanford? This focus on the prurient seems to be spreading farther a field to virtually everyone ... neighbors, friends, co-workers ... as the technology to extract and disseminate personal information (read that to include *social networking sites*) becomes more pervasive. This phenomenon is simply another example of hiding flaws ... hiding your flaws behind a *holier than thou* attitude toward others, or maybe saying *Thanks for taking the heat off of me!* Personally, I see it as wasting time on inconsequential crap rather than putting your efforts to more productive uses.

But, in truth, privacy isn’t only about hiding. It also involves protecting yourself and your family from the greed of others ... i.e. from crime. Modern technology means that traditional deterrents don’t work as well as in the past. For instance: fences, guard dogs, and firearms do little or nothing to deter theft through criminal impersonation ... what we call *identity theft*. To deter these threats, we must take technological precautions such as PINs and passwords, exerting reasonable care with personal information such as Social Security numbers, employing tools such as computer virus protection, etc. etc.



I know, I said we shouldn't have an expectation of privacy. The truth is a smart and crafty thief can probably overcome our defenses. That's nothing new. That's why we must rely to some extent on our community (ISPs, Police, the FBI, etc.) to assist in protecting us. But, most thieves are stupid and clumsy ... that's why they got into that "business" in the first place. So, we should not abrogate our defenses and make it easy for these people to steal from us. Recognizing the reality of our lack of privacy should encourage us to do more to protect ourselves, rather than to do less. Let's just understand that it's not the traditional protections that will provide the deterrents we need.

Finally, let me reiterate. We should have no expectation of privacy except perhaps in the well-protected confines of our home. That makes it a bit more difficult to protect ourselves and our families. But, on the other hand, realizing the difficulty of hiding our character flaws may mean that maybe each of us will act just a little nicer and thereby make the world a better place to live for all of us.

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