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## **'Intactivists' Seek to Undo A Long-Practiced Ritual**

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**CONCORD**, Calif. -- For over a century, in the belief that nature can be improved upon, Americans have circumcised their baby boys. Today, the value of circumcision as a health measure is in doubt in some quarters at a time when face lifts, tummy tucks and breast implants have lost their ability to shock us.

Should it come as any surprise, then, that some men would try to regain what circumcision took away? "If you're willing to walk around with a pin through your tongue," says R. Wayne Griffiths, one of the principal founders of the foreskin-restoration movement, "this is not absurd at all."

It is Sunday morning, and Mr. Griffiths is driving to church. His car's license plate reads "NORM.ORG," ([www.norm.org](http://www.norm.org)) Web site of the National Organization of Restoring Men, the fraternity he formed in 1989. Mr. Griffiths is 67 years old and works at a local sanitation district. He has white hair, a brush moustache, a voice like a creaky gate, and three matched pens in his shirt pocket. He's a Mormon.

At church, he greets the bishop and takes a pew with his sister and brother-in-law. He joins in the opening hymn: "As I search the holy scriptures, may thy mercy be revealed. Soothe my troubled heart and spirit; may my unseen wounds be healed." He closes his eyes and prays. And during a baby blessing, when a mother sheds a tear, he leans over and whispers, "Sometimes you get emotional with children."

Mr. Griffiths was married for 30 years before he got divorced. He has had six children; he has 21 grandchildren. That might be reason enough to get emotional about them, and about their unseen wounds. On the way home from church, driving past Pixi Land amusement park, he says, "Do you realize that the first sexual experience you ever had was also the worst trauma you've ever experienced? Maybe that went to the back of your mind and stayed there, just maybe."

He parks outside a complex of tree-shaded apartments; his own is on the second floor, an American flag flying from its balcony. Inside, file boxes fill a small front room. Family snapshots cover the top of an upright piano. Above the couch hang four artful pictures of naked couples, clipped from a magazine and framed. The men in the pictures are all "intact" -- uncircumcised. Taking his [Book of Mormon](#) from a shelf, Mr. Griffiths reads: "Wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me and ... the law of circumcision is done away in me."

As Mr. Griffiths sees it, circumcision falls morally into the same category as abortion: Don't unless you must. Nothing beyond the fringe in that. Jews circumcise their boys to signify a covenant with God; Mormons don't, nor do many other [Christians](#). Circumcision may still be the surgery performed most frequently in the U.S., but in other countries, far from it. And although many American doctors still insist it reduces urinary infections and a rare form of cancer, among

other things, the practice is on the decline. Health authorities, including the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), no longer deem routine circumcision of baby boys a medical necessity.

That said, grown-up boys who try to undo their own circumcisions might well be deemed beyond the fringe, if not around the bend. Yet, in the multifarious firmament of lonely causes, foreskin restoration shines out as the purest Americana. In a new book on circumcision, David Gollaher, president of the California Healthcare Institute, calls it "the kind of enterprise that draws together far-flung individuals who share a narrow preoccupation." But they also share that overarching American belief that anyone can right any wrong.

Of that, Wayne Griffiths is living proof. Religion didn't save him from an unkind cut, so he healed himself. It was no quick fix; he abhors scalpels. Instead, he adapted the standard tools of epidermal expansion to his anatomical circumstances: With surgical tape and weights, he stretched what he had left. Pacing himself between periods of rest and steady pressure, it took years. Along the way, he has helped thousands of men attempt the same, and put up with a quantity of ridicule. Mr. Griffiths' penile personal portraits have appeared in *Bennetton's* magazine (next to a facelift device and an artificial ear) as well as the [British Journal of Sexual Medicine](#).

"Finally, a year or so ago," he says, "I was there." He rises from his couch, and proudly unbuckles his belt. Thirteen centuries before the birth of Jesus, ancient Egypt had already been circumcising its boys for millennia. Tribes in Africa, the Americas, Australia and Indonesia had, too, just as some cut off fingertips, pulled earlobes or yanked teeth. Circumcision, for Jews, was an act of faith, but perhaps also a badge of affiliation. Islam saw it as a means of moral purification. Freud called it a castration substitute, other psychoanalysts a fertility symbol. In his studies, Dr. Gollaher found "no theory" to fit "the myriad facts."

It was America, however, that lent circumcision its renown for preventing disease on a mass scale. Beginning in the 1870s, it was touted as a cure for ailments from hernia to imbecility. Before the advent of antibiotics, public-health doctors presented it to parents of newborns as vital to personal cleanliness and as a guard against syphilis. By 1985, despite huge medical advances, 85% of baby boys in America had their foreskins cut; 60% still do.

### **A Personal Journey**

Mormonism never stopped the U.S. Army from circumcising Wayne Griffiths' father, nor a San Francisco doctor from circumcising the father's newborn son. But at age 12, Mr. Griffiths vividly remembers, he went to a fathers-and-sons chicken banquet in the church hall. One father, whose sons were intact, talked of circumcision and "how we shouldn't do it," he recalls. "From that time on, I suppose, I had a wonderment in my mind of what it would be like to be intact."

He didn't dwell on it. Life was moving quickly: junior college, four years in the Navy, a sociology degree from [Brigham Young University](#), a year as a San Quentin guard, back to school for a masters degree in criminology, four years in the Air Force, a masters in education, to Oregon for the Teachers Corps, and to Georgia as an assistant sociology professor at [Armstrong State University](#). At 21, in the Navy, he married. In 1956, his wife gave birth to twin boys, one stillborn. Was the other to be circumcised?

"They brought the child to my wife," says Mr. Griffiths. "I went out and walked in front of the hospital, thinking: Why am I doing this to him? But I did do it -- out of fear the hospital would call me some kind of pervert. I was in the military. I didn't want to jeopardize my children or my marriage by doing something heinous." With the birth of another boy three years later, he made the same choice. "In the 1950s," he says, "you didn't tell doctors not to do something. The power

was theirs. You didn't buck it."

Yet he couldn't shake the idea. In 1971, his brother Keith went into business as a construction consultant and asked him to come home to join in. Fate had its cue. Keith and Mr. Griffiths' 17-year-old son, Brett, died in a Piper Cub crash two years later. Mr. Griffiths' marriage soon died, too. By 1981, he was alone in Concord, working free-lance, seeing a therapist. "I felt diminished," he says. "You might say I felt emasculated." And then, in a fluke reflecting modern America's engines of social change, he watched a talk show.

### **A Pivotal Moment**

Phil Donahue, that day in 1987, had as his guests a syndicated radio doctor, Dean Edell, and a nurse named Marilyn Milos, both early and impassioned "intactivists." With them was a man who had tried to have a new foreskin surgically attached. "It was the first time I saw my inner thoughts expressed by someone else," says Mr. Griffiths. He called Ms. Milos, who sent him the name of a New Orleans dentist, who referred him to a Seattle engineer who was toying with nonsurgical foreskin restoration, using tape.

Mr. Griffiths went for it -- and went a step further. He phoned Bearing Engineering in Emeryville, Calif., purchased a set of stainless-steel bearings, welded them together and created a "tandem-bearing device." It looked like a barbell, two inches long. Deploying tape and the bearings in a manner best described as inspired, he achieved ideal tension for tissue expansion. It worked. The patent is pending.

"To feel whole again, that was the motive for me," Mr. Griffiths says. "Everyone should feel good about their body. I wanted something more -- to have what might have been. I really felt I wanted to be covered, and I am. That's happened." The accuracy of this claim, as Wayne Griffiths buckles up his belt, is hereby confirmed.

In the 1980s, a grass-roots attack on circumcision was gaining ground. Medical arguments aside, opponents compared it with genital mutilation of girls by other cultures. In the midst of his personal toils, Mr. Griffiths went to anticircumcision events and, at one, he met a man named Tim Hammond, who turned out to be absorbed in the same isolated pursuit. Swapping notes, they agreed it would be nice to start a support group -- and the foreskin-restoration movement was born.

To announce a first meeting, in February of 1990, the two took out ads in San Francisco's alternative press; if guys are squeamish about discussing their privates in public, they thought, gay guys might be less so. Two dozen men showed up that first time. Then 60. Meetings moved from apartments to a church. The gay-straight mix of the participants soon mirrored those of males in general.

In 1992, [Jim Bigelow](#), a psychologist who had also seen the Donahue show, published a book called "[The Joy of Uncircumcising](#)." In its third printing today, it has sold 18,000 copies. While Mr. Hammond resumed the circumcision fight, Mr. Griffiths built [NORM](#), his organization, into a network. It now has 27 U.S. chapters, plus five overseas. The Web, at last count, had 16 foreskin-restoration sites.

A popular fervor for human rights, frankly, didn't spark this response. Sex did. The [natural foreskin is ingrained with nerves](#), like any erogenous zone. In the past, some justified clipping it off to suppress sexuality. Whether that works, or works the opposite way, is an unanswered question. Mr. Griffiths and his friends promise that restoration heightens sensitivity. A number of them were circumcised later in life and know those nerves never grow back; all they can really

promise is a faux skin. Yet Mr. Griffiths believes men seek him out, deep down, for reasons less physical than psychological, and maybe a little political.

"They come for personal reasons, and then they get enlightened about the broader issue," he says. "It clicks immediately." When he takes off his hard hat and comes home after a day inspecting sewerage projects, Mr. Griffiths often finds 100 e-mails on his computer. He tries to answer each one. "Many are angry at doctors and parents. I tell them, if you start restoration, maybe you can do something with that anger, something constructive." Marilyn Milos, who has led circumcision protests for years, says this about Wayne Griffiths and the foreskin restorers: "They are men willing to declare: We've been wounded. It's affected our sexuality and our minds, and we're doing something about it. And Wayne is willing to lead that movement, writing long letters, week after week, with the gentleness of a father."

"I applaud their courage," says Ms. Milos. "These aren't kooks. They're just different from others backing the cause. I mean, wearing weights on the end of their penises -- this isn't lobbying, is it?"

### Meeting the Faithful

Another Sunday. Mr. Griffiths has skipped church to put in an appearance at NORM's [chapter in Los Angeles](#). Gary Harryman, who sells home sites in Topanga Canyon, picks him up at the airport. Mr. Harryman has been restoring for a few years. They drive to Culver City, discussing raccoon traps, and park at a powder-blue cube where support groups meet. Today's calendar also lists Survivors of Child Abuse, Anger Release and Co-Dependents Anonymous. A room of couches and soft chairs has filled with 25 men from their late teens to early 70s. Mr. Harryman presents the guest of honor: "This is our grand pere," he says.

"Happy to be here," says Mr. Griffiths. "Men all over the world want to know what they can do to restore. We're happy to help."

In turn, the men give first names and, later, occupations: locksmith, longshoreman, hairdresser, machinist, locomotive engineer, set designer, film producer, dentist, doctor, college professor.

"I'm Vincent, and I've been restoring for three years, thanks in good part to Wayne," says one. Bruce says, "I've been restoring for 28 months. I called you, Wayne. I remember our whole conversation." And Bill: "I've been at it for two months. This is the first program of personal growth where I've actually seen some personal growth!" Everyone laughs, and then settles down for a two-hour session on foreskin-stretching mechanics, aided by charts, plastic models and exhibitions. A loud banging intrudes from somewhere; it sounds like construction, but no one seems distracted. Mr. Griffiths talks of Meissner's corpuscles and somatosensory receptors. And he says:

"You can restore if you want, but you can also educate others not to circumcise their boys." That still isn't easy in America: Of Mr. Griffiths' own 11 grandsons, five have been cut. "We need to make our voices heard," he says. "All of us should do whatever we can that feels comfortable. I'm not trying to get you to do anything wild."

When the meeting closes, Mr. Griffiths shakes hands all around, listens to more personal stories, and finally heads for the airport. The men stick around, discussing foreskin-restoration gear the way some guys discuss fishing tackle. One of them, Richard Zerla, circulates an album of his personal penile portraits.

"That banging next door, you hear it?" he says as the others flip through it. "It's the anger-release group. They beat on pillows! You can't imagine what people get up to on this earth."

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