CENTER VALLEY  -  We’ve come a long way since that mythical first foray into the world of fashion.

In the story of our biblical progenitors, Adam & Eve fashioned the first human garments from fig leaves. Having fallen from grace, their eyes were opened to each other’s nakedness, and their sense of shame impelled them to cover themselves. Subsequently, before sending them out of the paradisiacal garden, the Lord God manifested divine solicitude by outfitting them with sturdier garments, thus affording a measure of protection against as-yet-unknown threats.

Today, what passes for stylish are babydoll tops for gals, graphic t-shirts for guys, and boot-cut jeans for both sexes. With some allowable substitutions, these hold the claim of “must-have items” this year for school-age youth, for whom “image is just about everything.”

But there’s more to that image (or less, depending on your perspective). The current rage among youth is “sagging” - that all too noticeable style of wearing pants so low that they expose one’s colorful underwear. Ambulatory concerns notwithstanding, the pants-below-the-hips look acts as the masculine counterpart to the Victoria Secretization of feminine fashion.

In Eden, fashion served as a cover-up; in today’s pop culture, clothing seems designed for maximum exposure. What originated from the acknowledgment of disrupted social relations, now appears as an impetuous disregard for public norms. Some, though, are not so accepting of the impulsiveness of young people’s attire. Several smaller towns are enacting ordinances outlawing the saggers’ style as indecent and, thus, a threat to good public image.
Fashion faux pas or freedom of expression? The debate runs much bigger than the britches in question.

Proponents argue that it’s up to the person who puts on the pants! Fashion remains a matter of individual taste and cultural trend, which makes “decency” something devilish to define. Evidence of this is clearly visible, along with various body parts, in more revealing outerwear that is already socially acceptable. In this viewpoint, prohibiting certain styles of dress is discriminatory, at best, and racially prejudicial, at worst. In a culture where freedom of expression is valued no matter what is actually being expressed, indecency laws are simply the imposition of a random social norm against those who prefer a different standard, or none at all.

Objectors counter that, absent an education in self-restraint that should have been learned at home, it behooves social institutions to teach citizens this lesson. Schools have codes, teams have uniforms, associations have policies (e.g., the NBA), and the workplace regulates the sense of professional attire. In this perspective, image does matter, and society does, or should, have its standards.

Aligned as it is with prison-issue garb and gangland swagger popularized in hip-hop music, some consider the prevalence of sagging as contributing to a rise in delinquency and the concomitant coarsening of society. As such, the lowering of the Levi’s seems now to be rising to the level of a social tipping point, where what appears to be something small in significance actually makes a big difference in how people think and act.

But legislation is hardly the way to fix fashion, or to adjudicate social mores. Though laudable as an expression of concern for, and attention to, how people live, laws that delve into this kind of detail may well have the undesirable effect of creating unnecessary division, through the struggle for social power that accompanies the bureaucratic process. Jonathan Rauch once characterized the rise of antisocial law, into which sagging could fall, as “courting danger” for everyone. Rightly does he remind us of the value, and the necessity, of what he calls Hidden Law: “social codes that everyone understands but that no one bothers to write down, or even could write down.”

The young have always been adventurous; many will even be defiant, if only for a time. Perhaps sagging is their way of drawing attention to themselves. Perhaps it reflects the “Generation Me” indifference to, or even rejection of, social standards set by their elders.

Nevertheless, society should demonstrate its concern. Even if they belong to “Generation Me,” today’s youth are tomorrow’s future. The “original sin” which occasioned the beginnings of fashion still governs human interactions. To act solely on desire, without regard for standards of goodness, ultimately betrays the quest for meaning in life.

Fashion does make a statement, if in fact people are that intentional about it. Grown-ups should be. But neither divine intervention nor legislative action are required to address our youth’s form of dress. Just tell a sagger you know to pull up his pants!