

On knowing (yes, in the biblical sense)

When I first had sex, it wasn't just teenage hormones. I wanted to know and be known.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [September 28, 2016](#) issue



Lucas Cranach the Elder, Adam and Eve, oil on panel, 1528.

My husband Benjamin was not my first. Not my first love, and not my first . . . *first*. Although I once was the proud wearer of a purity ring—a silver band acquired in junior high school that advertised my intention to remain a virgin until my wedding

night—at some point along the way, I misplaced the ring and, some years later, the virginity.

Beyond bursting into tears in the bathroom when it was over, I have few memories of the first time I went all the way with a boyfriend. The ring may have been gone, but I had absorbed its message. Sexual activity beyond the boundaries of marriage was wrong—a sin. Possibly even worse to a teenager acutely aware of peer pressure, the sexual relationship made me an outlier among my friends. They were good girls. They knew how to say no. At one point, a well-behaved and conscientious friend even ratted me out to her mother. Her mother, a friend of the family, called me up on the telephone after school one day to confront me. Never before or since have I experienced such an intense embarrassment. The only reason I didn't hang up on her or dissolve into a nonverbal puddle of mortification was my burning desire to get a word in edgewise: *Please, please, please, Mrs. Callahan, don't tell my mother.*

I had sex before I was married even though, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that “if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” I had sex before I was married even though practically every issue of my beloved *Brio* magazine managed to communicate that this was the worst possible thing a girl could do. I had sex before I was married even though I felt deeply guilty for everything I did, up to and including actual intercourse. Kissing and French kissing, petting and French petting (is that a thing?): it all filled me with a shame that overwhelmed whatever pleasure I might have otherwise derived.

Shame and gender norms notwithstanding, I pushed for more. With a few exceptions, I was often the instigator of the make-out sessions and the buyer of the condoms. I was a typically hormonal adolescent and young adult, after all, and hormones are a potent force. Yet as I recall the dalliances of my younger days, it's clear that sexual desire was only partly responsible. Curiosity kills the cat and lures the lusty. Part of my desire was a desire to *know*. I wasn't hungry for the apple as much as the mystery shrouded by its shiny red veneer. It makes all the sense in the world to me why the biblical idiom for sex is *knowing*; to know a man is to have been to bed with him.

As a girl hungry for God, I was drawn to Christian boys. Naturally, I proceeded to play the role of the fallen woman, taking the innocent and unsuspecting male down

with her. I once fell deeply in love with a charismatic, handsome, and narcissistic man. At the time I thought he was wondrously inscrutable and mysterious. Now I suspect he was actually just hypocritical and emotionally unavailable. One night he casually mentioned that he wanted to marry a virgin. We had *just* had sex.

I was naked and ashamed. The depth of rejection and betrayal I felt might have awoken me to the brokenness of our pairing, but I was far too consumed by the relationship. I felt no anger at the egregious double standard; it did not dawn on me to be vexed that he didn't seem as concerned about his own lack of virginity as he was about that of his ideal future wife. I didn't want out of his arms. I wanted to be redeemed so he would have me again. After an awkward silence, we untangled our bodies, got dressed, and then, at his suggestion, we prayed for forgiveness for having surrendered to the temptations of the flesh. We might as well have crossed our fingers as we promised Jesus that we wouldn't do it again.

While many biblical passages imply that marriage is the appropriate context for sexual activity, the prohibition against unmarried sex has been proclaimed even more loudly by the Christian church. Some historical epochs have been less forgiving to illicit lovers than others. Woe to the maiden Puritan who turned up pregnant in the 17th-century New England colonies. Woe, too, to the evangelical Christian who went all the way in the 1990s.

A few years ago, my friend Sarah Bessey practically broke the Internet with her blog post "I Am Damaged Goods." In her essay, she recounts an object lesson popular within a particular subculture of evangelical Christianity. In the midst of an impassioned lecture condemning sinners who had given in to lust, her youth pastor passed around a glass of water, encouraging the boys in the audience to spit into it. Upon daring someone in the crowd to drink the cocktail, the disgusted young people were charged to consider the cup the equivalent of an unmarried yet sexually active person. "This is what you are like if you have sex before marriage . . . you are asking your future husband or wife to drink this cup."

Bessey rejects the narrative. She refuses to accept the message that her worth is tied up in her sexual status. She preaches to herself and to me and to all who need to hear a good and gracious word spoken into their secret shame: "For I am convinced, right along with the Apostle Paul, that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any other power, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from

the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Not even ‘neither virginity nor promiscuity’ and all points between can separate you from this love. You are loved—without condition—beyond your wildest dreams already.”

My eyes filled with tears when I read Bessey’s words. They were a balm in Gilead. I hadn’t realized that the wounds of my premarital sexual activity still smarted; by the time I read the essay, I’d been married more than a decade. But those wounds were deep. They resisted healing. And they were particularly raw during the first year of our marriage.

Benjamin isn’t a controlling or jealous person. He would have accepted me for exactly who I was and what I had done—if I had let him. But I didn’t. Although he had not been formed by the same Christian subculture as I had and didn’t have the same misgivings about premarital sex, during our courtship I felt the need to protect myself and my story the only way I knew how. I fibbed. I fudged. I reshaped the rougher edges of my sexual history and revised a timeline or two to make myself look more wholesome. As the truth dribbled out, as the truth has a way of doing, Benjamin was livid. The falsehoods in question hadn’t put his health at risk, thankfully, though falsehoods about sexual activity certainly can. It wasn’t the string of boyfriends that momentarily turned me, in his eyes, into a cup of backwash. It was the lies. After it was all finally out, I was again naked and ashamed. Unlike when I was 19, however, Benjamin met my vulnerability with tenderness and forgiveness—not for what wasn’t his to forgive, but for everything that was.

I was experiencing a first. It was the first time I had ever been *fully* naked, the first time I was stripped not only of clothing but also of conceit, of charm, of armor, of fear. And it was safe—I was safe—because I was in the arms of a husband who loved me.

In that moment of physical, spiritual, and emotional exposure, I caught a convincing glimpse of why one might argue that sex is best kept within the boundaries of marriage. I began to understand why God might even go so far as to issue a strongly worded edict prohibiting premarital and extramarital sex, backed by the convicting presence of the Holy Spirit. It was only a fleeting glimpse, only a burgeoning understanding. I still wondered if the lingering shame I felt about my premarital sexual encounters had been instilled in me by a subculture that demands (especially from women) an arbitrarily defined purity.

And yet. The line in Sarah Bessey's essay that struck the deepest chord for me was this: "It's likely you would make different choices, if you knew then what you know now." There it is again: *knowledge*. I know now, and am known now, in ways that my immature adolescent self could never have accessed or understood. I wish to take Bessey's advice: "Don't make it more than it is, and don't make it less than it is." But "it" is *something*, and it's my responsibility to suss out precisely what that something is. I know now, and am known now, in marriage.

A book I begrudgingly appreciate is *The Meaning of Marriage*, by Timothy Keller. Keller is not my theological cup of tea. He embraces traditional gender roles and rejects same-sex marriage, and these points are not marginal to his arguments. They are central to his take on the whole institution of marriage. So while I longed to write him off on principle, I found myself nevertheless affirming a great deal of what I read, particularly his take on premarital sex.

One of the reasons we believe in our culture that sex should always and only be the result of great passion is that so many people today have learned how to have sex outside of marriage, and this is a very different experience than having sex inside it. Outside of marriage, sex is accompanied by a desire to impress or entice someone. It is something like the thrill of the hunt. When you are seeking to draw in someone you don't know, it injects risk, uncertainty, and pressure to the lovemaking that quickens the heartbeat and stirs the emotions.

Many will roll their eyes at this blanket statement. After all, according to Keller, he and his wife were virgins on their wedding night. What does he actually know about what it's like to have sex before marriage? Surely this is a reductive blanket assessment of casual or committed-but-not-married sex. There are undoubtedly a wide variety of ways to experience unmarried sex. But for me? Yeah. The shoe fits. I can see it now. My relationships with boyfriends were devoid of any true intimacy. Sure, on rare occasions the sex was great—but it was never truly good.

The contrast between unmarried and married sex is significant. The covenant of marriage—the vows to love now and forever—changes everything. It just *does*. In an infamous and controversial op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, conservative columnist David Brooks makes a case for marriage equality by advocating for the domesticating influence of marriage irrespective of sexual orientation. "Anybody who has several sexual partners in a year is committing spiritual suicide," he hyperbolizes. "He or she is ripping the veil from all that is private and delicate in

oneself, and pulverizing it in an assembly line of selfish sensations. But marriage is the opposite. Marriage joins two people in a sacred bond. It demands that they make an exclusive commitment to each other and thereby takes two discrete individuals and turns them into kin.”

But maybe this isn’t such hyperbole at all. Again, Keller’s words give voice to what I struggle to name. He writes of his early experiences of sexual expression with his lawfully wedded wife: “With sex, we were trying to be vulnerable to one another, to give each other the gift of barefaced rejoicing in one another, and to know the pleasure of giving one another pleasure.” Yes. But it took time for me to get to the place that such couples experienced from the first night of their honeymoons. I had to relearn sexuality: to extricate it from shame and to dispose of the self-protections I had needed when I engaged in physical intimacy without the security of marriage.

This was a slow process, not unlike grieving a loss. Much of it happened incrementally, with a couple of climaxes along the way. There was that one night, not long after our older daughter was born. I had healed from childbirth well enough to entertain the possibility of intercourse with my husband again. In the midst of our lovemaking, I was suddenly overcome with the obvious: we had made a *baby*. We had made a baby *by doing precisely what we were at that very moment doing again*, however gingerly. The beauty of this shocked me—shocked the shame right out of me. The sex felt so right in every way. No matter that we were very much in crisis, having had our world turned upside down by our beloved yet ever-squalling progeny. It was great. It was good.

I fatalistically fret that a renewed embrace of chastity before marriage is an unrealistic ideal; we live in a culture in which those gates are wide and irreversibly open. I’m very glad that people are no longer shunned for “shacking up.” But in many circles, one is hard-pressed to find a couple that doesn’t live together before marriage these days—if they ever get married at all.

I completely infuriated a liberal Christian friend recently by telling her that I suspect I might actually believe that sex is for married people. She chafes against the establishment of behavioral norms, seeing them as a source of oppression—especially for women, who have historically shouldered the burden of the consequences for disregarding them. She thinks I am still gripping the unnaturally heavy baggage of my evangelical youth, that my negative evaluation of my premarital sexual experimentation is the result of powerful cultural taboos. What

about her unmarried yet committed friends who have been together for a decade—are they “living in sin”? Are they selfishly fulfilling their own desires, unable to access the sort of cleaving of flesh and union of souls available to properly married couples?

I don’t know what to say to her. I don’t know what to say to my own dear friends who lived together shamelessly and happily for more than a decade before they married. Theirs was, by all accounts and appearances, as stable and loving and committed a relationship as any marriage, including my own, and no doubt quite a bit more stable and loving and committed than many marriages. The same is true for dear friends who found unexpected joy and pleasure in a late-in-life romance; for a variety of practical reasons, marriage wasn’t an option. I have neither grounds nor desire to judge them. I can say in theory that the covenant of marriage, the vow to love now and forever, changes everything—but I can’t say it to *their* faces because when I witness their great love for one another, the words turn to dust in my mouth.

In [an essay in the *Century*](#), Gerald W. Schlabach contends that the oft-ignored Pauline teaching to marry rather than to burn is worth revisiting. “‘To burn’ may stand for all the ways that we human beings, left to ourselves, live only for ourselves, our own pleasures, and our own survival. By contrast, ‘to marry’ may signal the way that all of us (even those who do so in a vocation of lifelong celibacy) learn to bend our desires away from ourselves, become vulnerable to the desires of others, and bend toward the service of others. This is a good thing for all.”

Schlabach complicates easy notions about marriage; some who are technically married might still be “burning.” Some who are not technically married may well be bending in ways that embody the grace and refuge of covenanted love. All of this is to say that while I long to uphold a sexual ethic of chastity for unmarried Christians, I don’t know how to do so without acknowledging that there may well be exceptions to the ideal—or, at the very least, *complications* to the ideal.

I don’t know how to encourage my parishioners—let alone my own children—to consider saving certain intimacies for the wedding night without descending into the same sort of supercilious finger-wagging that contributed to the calcification of my shame. And then there’s the hypocrisy angle; how do I preach abstinence when I myself failed to abstain? *Do as I say, not as I did*. But as Paul cautioned, “Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Cor 6:18, ESV). I know this firsthand. So perhaps I hold up

my pain: all that fooling around before marriage ever did was give me a world of hurt. But I can't hold up my pain without also lifting high my joy: all that fooling around within marriage ever did was give me a world of healing.

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