

A long obedience: On marriage and other covenants

There are many people with whom I have not had an affair. Billions. There is also one man in particular.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [January 21, 2015](#) issue



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It is strange to think of a particular person as the person with whom I did not have an affair. There are, in fact, many people with whom I have not had an affair. Billions. I have never slept with the mailman, or kissed my ex-boyfriend, or flirted with a stranger (at least not on purpose—sometimes I can’t contain my natural charm). Since I’ve never been unfaithful to my husband, there are a remarkable number of people with whom I have not committed adultery.

And yet there is one man I cannot help but think of as the man with whom I did not cheat on Benjamin. We had no improper physical contact, no inappropriately intimate conversations. I don’t even know if the attraction was mutual. There was, however, temptation. I felt desire. And when it comes to marriage, temptation and desire are nearly as shameful—nearly as sinful—as actually giving in. Just ask Jimmy Carter, who infamously confessed to *Playboy* magazine, “I’ve looked on a lot of women with lust. I’ve committed adultery in my heart many times.” Carter’s words made the nation cringe. But Jesus was the first to equate lust with adultery of the heart.

It doesn't seem fair. When my jeans start to fit too snugly, I track my diet. I don't have to tally up the slice of German chocolate cake I didn't eat. It doesn't matter how hungry I am, how badly I long to devour that frosting with a spoon and let it dissolve on my tongue until only flakes of sweet coconut remain. I could look up recipes for German chocolate cake in my ridiculously large library of cookbooks. I could buy all the ingredients at the grocery store after work. I could bake the damn cake, and so long as not a single morsel passes through my lips, I haven't done anything worth reporting to MyFitnessPal.com.

Having never actually had an affair, I'm no expert. But I reckon this is how it goes: you think you can have your cake without eating it, too. Invariably, you give in and indulge. And that's fine if the cake is just cake; you just won't be able to zip your trousers tomorrow. But if the cake is our handy metaphor for the man to whom you are not married—well, congratulations. You've committed adultery. Even if you never unzip your trousers, you've managed to carry on a doozy of an emotional affair, and by any definition, you've committed adultery in your heart.

When I realized that I had feelings for this man, I was shocked. I dearly love my husband, to whom I have been married—mostly happily, and decidedly faithfully—for more than a decade. I almost didn't recognize the crush for what it was, it had been such a long time since I'd had one. It was disorienting, terrifying, the slightest bit exhilarating—like being on a roller coaster but knowing full well that upon hitting the last loop-de-loop, your car will derail and you will plunge to your death. My internal alarms all tripped at once, clanging an overwhelming and persuasive warning. *Danger, danger.*

Danger, even though it wasn't primarily a physical attraction. If he had been an Adonis with a middling personality, I would have joked with my husband about my exceedingly hot new friend, just as he's been known to wink at me as he volunteers to take our kids to their gorgeous pediatrician. Rather, this man was brilliant and kind and—well, I'm not here to drool over the cake. The point is, I wanted to be friends with him. I didn't want to turn around and run the other way. I wanted to practice impeccable fidelity to my husband, and I wanted to do this without opting out of what seemed to be a fairly lovely potential friendship.

I did the only thing I could fathom: I told my husband everything. Even though there wasn't much to tell—oh, how profoundly glad I was to go to him with a clean conscience!—the conversation was risky. Would it wound Benjamin to know that his

wife, though delivered from temptation, had experienced it? Yes, it did. But it was a hurt he could sustain, because he understood that at the root of what I was telling him was that I was trustworthy. I had been tested and proven faithful.

As we pondered the nuances of fidelity, a curious thing happened: our love for and attraction to each other deepened. Benjamin trusted me to nurture the new friendship. I established the boundaries that would govern my platonic relationship with this man to whom I am not married, and in so doing, I rediscovered the intrigue of my delightfully unbounded relationship with the man to whom I am. There is yet more for us to know of each other, physically, spiritually, emotionally. And as husband and wife we have the incredible freedom to explore each other without hesitation or shame. There is nothing to stop us from growing ever more intimate. Don't believe anyone who says otherwise: fidelity can be sexy. Very sexy.

In the time since I was, as we pray, "delivered from temptation," I've encountered countless stories of infidelity. They are everywhere; they always have been. They are featured in films and literature. They provoke salacious headlines and awkward institutional announcements. I receive these stories just a hair differently nowadays. You would think I'd be more understanding, having stood at such a precipice myself. I'm not. If anything, I'm more inclined to indignation. *I walked away, why couldn't you?* I fumed the last time a pastor publicly confessed to adultery. (Why is it so much worse when clergy cheat? Is it because we generally have access to mental health resources and systems of accountability? Or is it because we have an even greater obligation to honor the covenants we make?)

My spiritual director had to remind me of John's story of the woman caught in adultery: *Put the rock down*. Wise teaching, but I still think it's helpful to recall the exceptional significance of fidelity in the biblical tradition. The prohibition against adultery is, after all, written in stone. And infidelity in marriage is intimately related to infidelity to God—because each is a covenant relationship.

A covenant is an agreement not unlike a contract, save for one minor detail: it's completely unlike a contract. Contracts are conditional, limited, and generally entered into for reasons of self-interest. They are legal documents that can be used against you if you violate their terms. Covenants aren't legal, but they are sacred. They can be established between equals, such as two people, or unequals, such as God and God's people. And they are unconditional: if one party fails to follow through, the covenant remains in place. There's no statute of limitations. A contract

is to covenant as ink is to blood.

The first covenant is initiated by God after the flood. God promises never to do such a thing again. Noah, for his part, is supposed to keep kosher (more or less; it's a thing about blood and meat) and to get cracking on the baby making. The first covenant is sealed with a rainbow—which, along with all the zebra and turtle and rabbit pairs, explains why this violent, disturbing tale is often deemed appropriate for toddlers. A series of covenants follows, by which God identifies, blesses, and sets the chosen people apart. They come with steep and often bewildering expectations—have you read Leviticus?—but are always rooted in relationship. God is undeniably smitten with the descendants of Abraham. God wants this one to last, you know? As Jeremiah puts it, “They will be my people, and I will be their God.”

The amazing—and painful—thing is that by the time Jeremiah passes along this beautiful word of the Lord, God's beloved people have been totally and repeatedly screwing up for ages. They sin, and sin, and sin some more. And with a covenant in place, a sin isn't merely a violation of the law. It's a betrayal of the relationship; it's personal. The Israelites are being unfaithful.

At the beginning of the book of Hosea, God says to the prophet, “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.” Yes, the prophetic allegory employs some gender dynamics that are a tiny bit problematic. But the language of Hosea, with its sheer ferocity, also conveys the ravaging consequences of unfaithfulness. One does not use the word *whoredom* thrice in one sentence if one is not in extreme emotional pain.

Despite marrying Hosea and bearing his children, Gomer wanders. She cheats on her husband. She is the prodigal wife, disregarding the covenant of marriage by committing adultery. At one point she sells herself into slavery, but even then God tells Hosea to extend mercy to her yet again by buying her back. Hosea loves and forgives his “wife of whoredom.” God loves and forgives God's spiritually promiscuous people who trample on the covenant that is supposed to bind them to God and to one another, over and over and over again. God is merciful to an agonizing degree.

Dear God, I don't want to be Gomer. I don't want my marriage to be like that. I want to honor all the covenants that govern my life: marriage, yes, but also baptism and

ordination. I don't want to sin against the ones I love.

Sometimes I wonder why we are surprised that so many marriages end in discarded vows and broken covenants. Humans are, it would seem, highly susceptible to infidelity. Yet there are vows that are cherished and covenants that are kept, and the consequence of mutual fidelity is a life steeped in blessings.

Not long ago, my church celebrated the 60th anniversary of our beloved associate minister's ordination. With a great deal of pomp and circumstance, we sent him forth into his well-deserved retirement. There were trumpets and breathtaking handmade gifts and original songs (20 new verses to "For the Beauty of the Earth," each praising God for the various, sundry, and abundant gifts of Paul and his wife; no, we didn't sing them all, but we sang a whole lot). Paul preached his final sermon, "A Last and Lasting Word," which pointed not to his words but to the enduring word of God. Then the congregation stood and applauded until our palms stung.

I feel extremely lucky to have served alongside Paul during the last years of his ministry. He is an old-school pastor (in all the best ways), a modern mystic, and a wildly funny jokester. But what strikes me as most remarkable is his fidelity, what Eugene Peterson would call his "long obedience in the same direction." Paul has spent his life fulfilling the ordination vows he made when he was 25, as well as the marriage vows he exchanged with his wife three years earlier. His life is a brilliant, shining example of the beauty of covenant. Whenever a community celebrates a big anniversary—of a wedding or an ordination, and others, I'm sure—it is a lovely reminder that the grandiose promises one makes in one's youth can bear out, and bear fruit.

A "long obedience in the same direction" has its stretches marked by the strain of toil and the fret of care, but it also has its glorious mountaintop vistas and the camaraderie of good company. And sometimes—if you so happen to land in a place that knows how to party—a three-piece band playing Dixieland jazz sets up shop outside the sanctuary to fete you as you make your way to the fellowship hall to greet hundreds of people who love you because you have loved them so very, very well. If you ask me, nothing says "well done, good and faithful servant" like a tuba, a clarinet, and a banjo.

On our way out, after the gifts had been given and the tear-streaked cheeks had been kissed, I danced with my daughters by the bandstand while Benjamin shook his

head and laughed. I pretended they were goading me to dance, but it was really the other way around. I wanted to savor this moment that was not our moment but had graciously become one of the moments in my own joyfully covenanted life, my own long obedience in the same direction.

A portion of this article appeared in a different form at [A Deeper Story](#).