

Fidelity makes you happy

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [September 9, 1998](#) issue

What Bill Clinton and others like him don't understand is that sexual escapades always bring more trouble than they are worth. It is fidelity that makes you happy," my friend said. The conversation had been moving along at a rapid clip until that last sentence. Fidelity makes you happy. I hesitantly nodded in agreement. But I didn't know what to say.

I don't know if I was called up short by the audacity of that statement, a countercultural observation in the midst of our sex-obsessed culture, or by the fact that the friend who spoke is divorced, and so one who has had to struggle with failure in marriage.

Or perhaps it was because we are used to talking about these issues in terms of their negative restrictions: thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not lust after another; thou shalt not have eyes for anyone other than thine own spouse. Or, as one young man commented to me about his impending marriage, "My fiancée has reminded me that once I step to the altar, I will never again sleep with another woman. Whoa."

My friend was not suggesting, of course, that sexual fidelity will make you happy in the consumer-driven sense of short-term gratification. Indeed, the desire for short-term gratification often drives sexual promiscuity.

Rather, my friend was suggesting that for those not called to celibacy, sexual fidelity is crucial to a flourishing life. If you want to be fulfilled in life, learn how to be faithful--especially in sexual matters. It takes time, and hard work, to be faithful. Yet we discover the grace of God's love in such patient, disciplined work.

I was delighted to see these claims affirmed and eloquently amplified in Catherine M. Wallace's recent book *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our Lives*. Wallace began reflecting on these issues because she wanted to figure out how she would talk to her children about sex. A child of the sexual revolution, she was wary of "traditional" presumptions about sex. Yet she had concluded through

her own marriage and reflections on the lives of her friends that sexual fidelity is crucial, and that such fidelity is as important for homosexual as for heterosexual relationships.

According to Wallace, sexual fidelity is a good in itself, not simply because it is useful to other ends (by preventing disease and sustaining social orders that depend on coherent family structures, for example) or because it follows from other virtues (such as justice and obedience to God). Rather, "sexual fidelity is a practice intrinsic to the happiness of a happy marriage." It enable us to live more flourishing lives.

Yet Wallace notes that sexual fidelity is a practice. Like other practices, such as learning to play the flute well, sexual fidelity requires discipline, effort and commitment. It requires the development of good habits.

Sexual fidelity releases us, Wallace suggests, from the consumerist self-absorption that undermines community and destroys our lives. She observes that sexual fidelity helps us understand how it is that we find ourselves precisely by losing our obsessive concern with ourselves. Put even more strongly, she believes that the practice of sexual fidelity blesses our lives and schools us for a love of, and desire for, God:

The blessing of sexual fidelity is not a thing or a place that you reach or fail to reach. It's not a test or a task at which you succeed or fail. Those are the wrong categories; those oppositions are category mistakes. The blessing of sexual fidelity is a process. It is a discipline or a craft or an entire way of life. It is a spiritual practice grounded in the ultimate energies of erotic desire.

It is almost as striking to think of sexual fidelity as a spiritual practice as it is to think of it as intrinsic to a flourishing life. But if, as Jews and Christians believe, we are created by God out of loving communion and for the sake of loving communion, then it should not surprise us that we would find fulfillment through fidelity. Yet, in the midst of a world in which we diminish one another and ourselves as the result of sin, we must acknowledge just how difficult--and how vulnerable--such a practice of sexual fidelity will be. We must learn and relearn how to be faithful. That is one reason why sexual promiscuity, even during our youthful exploration, is so dangerous. Habits are very difficult to break.

Sexual fidelity is vulnerable also because it requires two partners. A person committed to the practice of sexual fidelity can be severely hurt by the infidelity, the violence, the emotional abuse or even the loveless indifference of the partner. The virtue of sexual fidelity should not be understood as an expectation to stay within a relationship regardless of the consequences.

Our public discourses within the churches as well as in the wider culture have been corroded by our unwillingness to articulate the blessings of sexual fidelity, and the artistic discipline its practice requires throughout a lifetime. Rather than only telling our kids to "just say no," perhaps we can learn to describe for them how and why sexual fidelity enables a flourishing life.

I read Wallace's book while on vacation at the beach. As I sat on the porch overlooking the ocean one evening I saw a large ship, known colloquially as "the booze cruise," heading out for a six-hour party. Undoubtedly many of the people were simply out for a fun evening, often with their spouses. However, the ship is also notorious as a great "pick-up" spot. Indeed, a popular T-shirt there says, "I'm horny, you're drunk--how about it?"

These folks were seeking happiness. Many would wake the next morning wondering what had happened. Could it be that the claim that "the practice of sexual fidelity makes you happy" offers a prophetic witness to our culture, to our kids, and to us?