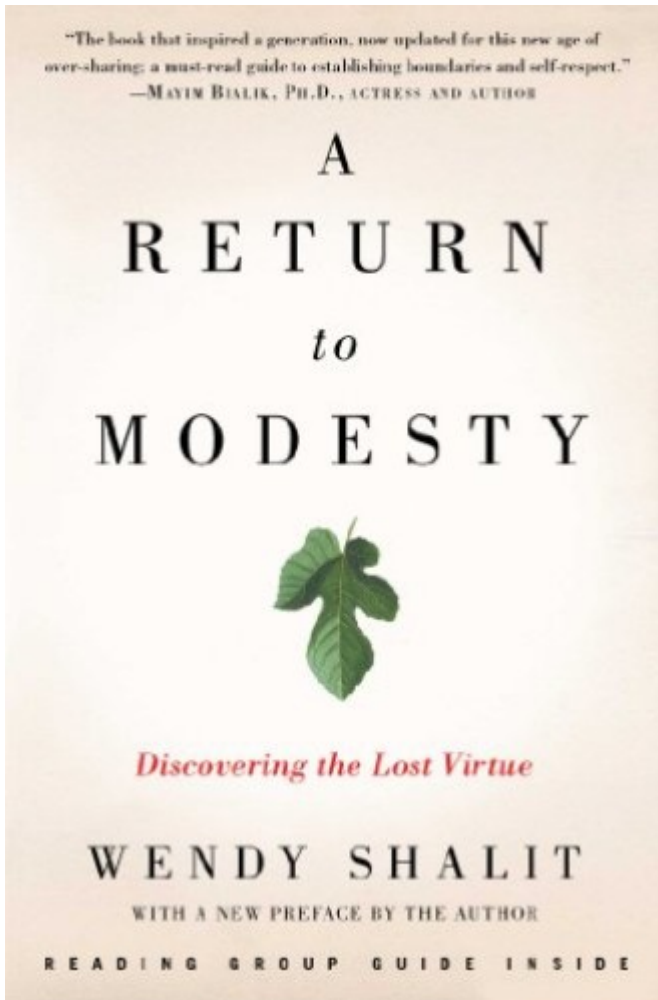


Wendy Shalit's modesty-colored glasses

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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In Review



A Return to Modesty

by Wendy Shalit

Free Press

What do rape, online bullying, hookup culture, MTV, child trapeze artists, and feminists all have in common? According to Wendy Shalit, they are all enemies of

modesty.

Shalit's new preface to the 15th-anniversary edition of her book *A Return to Modesty* gives the impression that she spent the last 15 years collecting anecdotes she believes prove her point about our culture's shocking lack of modesty. Then she drew on the most vivid ones to convince us that, the first time her book came out, she was "attacked not for being wrong, but—paradoxically—for being right."

I do not question that modesty—broadly understood (against Shalit's reading) as including economic choices and choices about how to assess one's own place in the world and choices about how much attention to draw to oneself—is a virtue. So are patience, lovingkindness, and gentleness.

Of course, books on these virtues are unlikely to sell many copies. What shocking anecdotes would you choose to write a book called *A Return to Patience*? Patience is just as worthy of cultivation, and perhaps even more needed. But because the anecdotes wouldn't be about sex, I doubt we could interest the public.

What I object to most in Shalit's new preface is the logical realm into which it takes me. It is meant to stimulate my anxieties at the place where I am most vulnerable: my children. It is based on the almost desperate need to control the behavior of others in order to protect my child.

And it is based almost entirely on fear. Fear of boys. Fear of girls. Fear of other parents' bad choices. Fear of television and magazines and other media. The formula: pile on the fear and magnify it by anecdote.

I could counter this with example after example of people behaving well, couples treating each other kindly, contemporary relationships being built on mutual respect, young people with deep and meaningful dreams for their lives. But how boring would that be? It would not effectively counter the logic at work.

Fear and the need for control are mixed with a false sense of urgency. Shalit takes an apocalyptic view of young women dressed inappropriately. Never mind that generations have been complaining about how the next generation dresses since Socrates. *Now* we have really crossed the line. This is it! Doom is truly upon us. Men and women won't have meaningful relationships anymore. Hopes for equality will shatter. Women will not achieve their true potential.

Shalit's new preface plays on this sense of urgency. And I understand. Urgency sells books. Urgency is why the editors asked her to write a new preface in the first place.

But if the end result is that 15 years later, some things are better and some things are worse, then where exactly is the edge we are supposed to be careening off?

When fear, control, and false urgency are front and center, other things must take a back seat. Self-criticism and ambiguity, for example. I would have found the new preface refreshing if Shalit had said, "Here are three things I've learned since I wrote this book at the tender age of 23. Here's what life has taught me."

But she doesn't. Instead she models how to take up a position behind the barricade, peering through a peephole at just how awful we've all become.