

Why do people cheat?

By [Greg Carey](#)

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Several of my friends found inspiration in [Katherine Willis Pershey's recent encomium to fidelity in the *Century*](#). But I felt a strong aversion to the article, a reaction that's led me into a period of self-examination. Upon reflection, I have almost no objection to the actual content of the article. It's what Pershey doesn't say—stuff she is not obliged to say—that has my attention.

Fidelity is a wonderful thing. Adultery is a horrible, destructive sin. But if we want to promote fidelity and empower faithful people as they resist temptation, we should consider what actually happens when well-intentioned people violate their marriage vows.

My perspective is my own. I'm a 49-year-old man who survived divorce without having committed adultery. I take very little credit for this success; I regard it as a gift from God. I still hear the voice of my pastoral care professor, the great Wayne Oates, admonishing Southern Baptist men (mostly) on the dangers of sexual misconduct: "Don't think you're above it." I've never regarded myself as above it, and I certainly don't consider myself morally superior to other people who have failed.

I married my college sweetheart, a wonderful woman who has devoted her life to helping others and who has proven a faithful, effective parent. We were married for 16 years, the last several of which were very painful. We talked. We took classes and read books. We engaged in long-term therapy. Eventually we separated and divorced. Could we have done better? Could I? Of course. But my ex-wife and I tried very hard.

During our marriage, I was careful to maintain healthy relational boundaries. I never dared participate in an extramarital relationship. My life revolved around family, work, church, and a few male friends. Deep inside, however, I knew I was vulnerable. I sensed that I was willing—given the wrong place, time, and person—to have an affair.

On one occasion I knew I wanted to. This time it was particular: this person, this time and place. But I was afraid, and in a moment of hesitation I did what former Southern Baptists do. I took it to Jesus. And in a rare mystical moment, I sensed a divine word: of course I wanted to have an affair. I was unhappy in my marriage. My most significant relationship was failing. I wasn't taking care of my spirit or my body, and I wasn't making time for male friends. I was empty, and I hoped an affair would validate my ego and fill the void within my soul. These revelations led to important changes that brought me through a most difficult transition.

Fortunately, I was protected from some of the emotional and social harm that comes with divorce. As a tenured seminary professor, I had built-in status and community. My friends understood vulnerability and grace. People rarely challenged me for failing at marriage—a failure that remains the greatest of my life. Not everyone enjoys privileges like these.

A retired pastor asked about my divorce. “What happened?” he asked, putting on his compassionate pastor voice. “Did the grass just seem greener on the other side of the fence?” I responded kindly, but the question was wrong in all sorts of ways. It reflected a sensibility that creeps through in Pershey's article as well:

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.

I don't think that's usually how it goes. While some people may simply be immoral or undisciplined, most truly strive to be faithful. Yet sometimes they fail, and not because they needed a little extra dessert. The longing for intimacy isn't like a heat-of-the-moment craving. Decent people fail because they hope a relationship will fill a deep and genuine need. It's not a piece of cake to them; it's more like Gatorade during a summer hike. Sweetener may make it all the more appealing, but the need for hydration is real.

Once one divorces, friends flock to offer comfort—but not really. More often they need to share their own unhappiness, and you're a safe conversation partner. You've been there; you get it.

I exhort them to turn aside from adultery at all costs. If their marriage endures, they'll have avoided deep wounds to the person they love most and serious damage

to themselves. If they eventually divorce, they will still face the mirror, the communion table, and (often) their children.

I am profoundly grateful that I did not commit adultery during the end stages of my marriage. But I am not *proud* of it, because I am not above it. Knowing my own weakness, and the reasons virtuous people stumble, is my best chance for holding true to my covenants.