Made to be broken

Sometimes the harm caused by breaking a promise is less than the harm caused by keeping it.

by Peter W. Marty in the January 2025 issue
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Promises are lovely. When they're made with honesty and kept with reliability, they form the substructure of healthy relationships, the backbone of a well-functioning society. "Cross my heart and hope to die," we used to say as kids, having no real idea what those words meant except that they conveyed the zeal of our trustworthiness. We'd then spit on the ground before friends to seal the promise.

Promises may indeed be lovely, but some of them should never be made, and the worst of those deserve to be broken. It can hurt to renege on a promise we've made to others or, for that matter, to ourselves. Backing out of a commitment feels like a betrayal of trust or the worst kind of lie. But not every promise made is a good one. Too many are founded more on good intention, fanciful wish, or self-interest than on solid wisdom.

A father breaks the news to his children that despite an earlier promise of an ice cream run, he has a migraine and must head to bed. A mother who's fed up with Donald Trump's crude behavior and demeaning rhetoric can't imagine casting a vote for this GOP standard bearer, but not to do so feels to her like a betrayal of her internal promise to be a lifelong Republican. A girl confides in two friends that her father is sexually abusing her but makes them promise not to tell anyone, fearful that she'll incur unspeakable punishment if he finds out she talked. Some promises are meant to be broken, even some we make to ourselves. If the harm caused by breaking a promise is less than the harm caused by keeping it, then good moral sense should have us reexamining our obligation to that promise.

One promise that never fails to disturb me is the one I've heard countless times over my nearly four decades in the pastorate. I'm speaking of the pledge spoken by a family member who's caring for a loved one with a long but terminal illness. "I promised Jack that I would never place him in a nursing care facility—that I would care for him at home until the very end, no matter what." Really? No matter what? You're 88 years old, tending to Jack around the clock, unavailable to any of your friends or interests, shriveling up from inadequate sleep and food, basically exhausting yourself to the point where you may well die before he does. "But, Pastor, I promised him I would be the one to care for him no matter what." This woman is so busy being a caregiver that she's forgotten she's actually Jack's spouse.

I've come to realize that many people who make such fervent, nonnegotiable promises like this are worried about disappointing themselves as much as their infirm spouse or parent. Their pledge of loyalty to meet their own standard for providing unceasing care is one they cannot imagine canceling. To them, that would feel like betrayal. So, using promise language, they try to create for themselves what theologian Lewis Smedes once called "an island of certainty in a heaving ocean of uncertainty . . . a small sanctuary of trust within a jungle of unpredictability." They hope to deliver a reliable future through a promise, only to find out that the future can't be managed, controlled, or fully known.

If only Jack’s wife could know that her loyalty to a promise that never should’ve been made doesn’t define her integrity; her loyalty to the emotional needs and changing circumstances of the man she loves does. To be a person of constancy and fidelity doesn’t require that we be all things or do all things. It only demands that our love resemble the ineffable presence that speaks from a burning bush in Exodus 3: *I am the one who will be there with you.*