Virginity: Notes for Teachers and Parents

The idea of virginity, once sacred and fundamental to the civilization, has become sullied to such an extent that the notion itself, at least in some "progressive" circles, is seen as a quaint anachronism, somewhat akin to good spelling and proper grammar: something more honored in the breach than in the practice. The Virgin Mary has been superseded in popular attention and reverence by Madonna, whose "Like a Virgin" song and whose stage persona represent the antithesis of the icon of The Virgin. The fact of virginity, however, is another matter: the most recent polls of adolescents show that around 50% of girls 17 and under (and slightly fewer boys) remain virgins (MacDonald, 74), resisting successfully the most powerful of pressures to join the crowd. Contrary to peer pressure ("Everyone is doing it"), popular media (Doogie Howser, Roseanne's daughter Becky, and Beverley Hills 90210's Brenda all lost their virginity this autumn's television season), the increasingly early onset of puberty itself, and decreasing adult disapproval of teen sexual experimentation, about half the teenagers on the block are holding out. Schools have complicated the matrix by a stance of basic moral cowardice: "We teach sex education, but we do not impose values here," a stance that is analogous to charting the course and rigging the boat, then merely hoping the child will refrain from launching prematurely. Despite the basic complicity and moral lassitude of most of the adult world, about half the teens have better sense than we do, perhaps knowing intuitively that preserving one's virginity, at least until adulthood if not until marriage, may be the safe and prudent route to take, since those who engage in sex prematurely are more often than not hurt in some way. This essay is intended to help the parents and teachers of the world to support the wise choice of virginity on the part of half the teens out there, and perhaps to change the trend line back to where it was way back when.... We can only be responsible if we address all three points along the continuum of advice to teens on sex: proselytize abstinence, counsel postponement, teach prevention. Some folks are telling teens that sex is unsafe (and kids don't believe it, at least for them); what we should be telling teens and what they should be hearing is that sex is unwise, until one is an adult.

The idea of virginity and chastity has been so deeply embedded in our civilization historically, mythically, and culturally that one should hesitate more pronouncedly than most apparently do at the current pronouncements about the demise of virginity. To paraphrase W.C. Fields, "The announcement of the death (of virginity) may be premature." At the very least, such a pronouncement should be judged unwise and
unfortunate because, in part, it runs so counter to the accumulated mythical weight of the culture. For western culture, the archetypal virgin comes from both Greek and Christian heritages: for the Greeks, the ideal of virginity was embodied in both goddess (the demure Diana) and woman (Leda). In the case of Greek mythology, the violation of the virgin by the rape of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan results in the birth of Helen, and ultimately the downfall of Troy. For Christians, the archetypal female virgin figure is of course Mary, Mother of God, and the archetypal male virgin figure is her son, Christ. Interestingly, the sacrifice of the virgin (Christ) in this case is the male rather than the female, a sacrificial death of the virgin (the pure and innocent) that is traceable almost universally not only to Greek and Christian heritages but also to primitive and pagan cultures long before its enshrinement in Christian Gospel. Likewise, it is the male virgin in Arthurian legends who is ennobled and beatified, the Sir Galahad who succeeds in the search for the Holy Grail after Lancelot, compromised and no longer the virgin (no longer the Christ figure) fails. In English tradition, the power of the virgin finally became politically enshrined in Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, lionized in literature as Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queen.

In contrast, it is the seduction, traducement, and despoilment of the virgin that our collective cultural and psychological heritage tells us is the most grievous of sins. From the Satan/serpent's seduction of Eve and the postlapsarial consequences of the Fall, we have embedded in our ancient stories the suggestion of horrible consequence for sexual transgression (i.e., sex outside of marriage). Freud's classical horrific image is the Medusa's head, with its phallic snakes and sublimated suggestion of the punishment of castration for sexual sin. The idea of terrible punishment in the form of physical disfigurement for sexual sin is traceable from Classical drama (Oedipus Rex, in which Oedipus tears out his eyes upon discovering he has slept with his own mother), to Biblical narrative (Sodom and Gomorrah), through fairy tale and Gothic horror story into more contemporary popular art. In fairy tales, for example, it is clear that the psychological subtext of many stories is the admonishment to children that it is dangerous to entertain sexual encounters at a premature age. In the Brothers Grimm version of "Little Red Cap" (known to us now as "Little Red Riding Hood"), it is clear that the wolf represents the animal/Id side of rapacious man, and the wolf's "seduction" of Little Red Cap to leave the path to play in the flowers (after mother had given strict orders to her to stay on the path to grandmother's) leads to her demise, in bed, at the mouth of the voracious wolf. Likewise, in "Rapunzel," the
mother/witch incarcerates Rapunzel at age 12, the age of puberty, in an inaccessible, doorless (phallic) tower. When Rapunzel "unbound her braided tresses, opened the window, and let her hair down" (all, incidentally, images of opening up and letting go), the prince espies the witch climbing up Rapunzel's hair, and he soon thereafter follows suit. In effect, the prince convinces Rapunzel to ride away with him on his horse (i.e., he seduces her), but before they can leave, the immature and naive Rapunzel tells the witch, who in turns punishes Rapunzel by cutting her hair (physical disfigurement). Subsequently the witch punishes the prince by casting him out of the tower, where he falls into the brambles that scratch his eyes into blindness (the classical Oedipal punishment for sexual transgression). It is only years later, after both wander in the sterile desert, that the prince again encounters Rapunzel; her tears fall on his eyes, restoring his sight, and they then marry happily: i.e., after enough time has passed so that Rapunzel is past childhood and ready for womanhood.

The defining event in all of the genre of horror is a monster's abduction of the virgin bride on the eve of her wedding. What makes the genre so horrific (and paradoxically so engaging and titillating) is the victimization of the virgin. Consider Bram Stoker's Dracula, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and Gaston Leroux's The Phantom of the Opera: in each and every case, the monster has a grotesque deformity, a physical correlative for the bestial side of man, the Id's outcropping when unchecked by the civilizing effect of the Superego. One could also argue that within the physical deformity, especially the phallic imagery of the vampire's teeth drawing the virgin's blood, the stake through the neck (Frankenstein) or heart (Dracula), the missing nose (the original Phantom), the grossly disfigured face (Mr. Hyde), one sees that the Oedipal theme of terrible disfigurement as punishment for sexual transgression manifests itself time and again.

In more contemporary popular culture the idea of the virgin manifests itself still, although in much more complex forms, through the image of the Madonna/whore. It is arguable that the Madonna/whore image, the notion of the pure virgin and the "fallen woman," emerges in Christian gospel: the contrast between the two Marys, the Virgin Mary (Mary as virgin and virgin as mother) and the other Mary, Mary Magdalene, the whore who is resurrected through the intervention of Jesus. The rock star Madonna ("Like a Virgin"), who projects ponytailed innocence one moment and salacious experience the next, reflects just such a contemporary version of the Madonna/whore nexus. As another quintessential American popular genre indicates, the western, we have highly ambivalent attitudes at times about women, in fact,
ambivalence about both the virgin and whore projections of woman. In the western, for example, the stock characters include the saloon girl and the schoolteacher. (In the forties and fifties classic westerns, the saloon girls were almost always part Mexican or part Indian, incidentally, and the virgins almost always white--see Stagecoach, My Darling Clementine, etc.) Invariably, the western hero sleeps with the saloon girl (and is closest to her of all other characters, sharing her wild, "untamed" nature) and is moved to action in the name of the schoolteacher but to protect the person of the saloon girl: it is either a direct or indirect threat from the bandits or the Indians towards the town or the wagon train (and specifically the young women living therein--i.e., the saloon girl and the virgin in white) that propels the western hero, reluctantly, into the use of violence to restore order. The classic example of this is High Noon, where the sheriff (the Gregory Peck character) has to vanquish the bandits (the leader brandishing a terrible scar, monster-like) to protect the town, and by extension both the saloon girl (Helen Ramirez) and his virgin bride, literally dressed in white the entire time of the film (the Grace Kelly character). The tremendously powerful attraction of the film, as with the horror stories cited above, is connected to our collective need to experience vicariously the threat to the virgin while at the same time seeing that the threats to the principle of purity itself are ultimately vanquished, and terribly so in some cataclysmic retribution.

And so it goes with story after story that we continue to tell ourselves. Just as Freud argues that there must be something so powerful about the Oedipus story to have made it popular for thousands of years (i.e., our unconscious sexual urges), so too one might argue is the case for stories of virginity, both the stories that affirm male and female virginity and those that take delight in repressing the figures who threaten it. If we have been telling ourselves these stories for so long, we might pause before we cast aside the ideal that they affirm: maintaining one's virginity until the sanctioned moment arrives, in adulthood and preferably under the blessing of marriage. Freud's basic thesis in Civilization and Its Discontents is that it is the displacement and sublimation of the Id's sexual energies by the Ego into one's work that produces great art and the conventions of civil life itself. Robert Coles, Harvard psychiatrist and professor, has argued that there may be some validation of Freud's theory in the research on teenage sexual activity: of those who plan to finish only "some of high school," 76% are nonvirgins; of those who plan to complete "all of college," 76% are virgins, the mirror opposite in numbers (Coles and Stokes, 203). We may well assume that the premature forsaking of virginity carries with it many dangers, personally, psychologically, societally. That is why we have been telling these stories about virgins for so long, and why our not listening to them now is so very dangerous.
The culture indeed has affirmed and deified virginity since humans became human, that is, since civilization took form, but the bombardment of images in the popular culture today are surely more weighted towards forsaking virginity for pleasure, carpe diem, than for restraining oneself until adulthood or marriage. It is somewhat surprising and reassuring, consequently, to find a significant number of adolescents who maintain their virginity, despite considerable pressure to do otherwise. The most recent polls indicate that around 50% of those 17 or younger remain virgins. Given the ease with which many teens (about half the group) engage in sexual activities, one might assume that not all of the rest are virgins out of necessity rather than choice. It is easy to assert cynically the unavailability of sexual partners for the virgins in the group, but it is more likely that some decision-making is going on that inclines this group not to look too hard for the partner willing to go the whole remaining 90 yards of the game. Once past seventeen, however, the figures change dramatically in the wrong direction. Seventy-two percent of high school seniors, male and female, have experienced sexual intercourse (according to the Centers for Disease Control), but those that hold out until that point seem to have made a firm decision to remain chaste, since 25 percent of females still remain virgins at 19 (and twenty percent of never-married women remain chaste through their twenties, as reported by The Alan Guttmacher Institute) (Pagnozzi, 235). Since the physical, emotional, and psychological dangers of early intercourse increase as one goes down the age scale (the younger one starts, the more likely one is to have multiple partners and increased risks), our efforts as parents and teachers should be to work as vigorously on counseling postponement as we proselytize abstinence: the numbers show us that there are teens who make the abstinence or postponement choices, and we should exert our efforts affirm their decisions and to make their numbers grow.

If there are fundamental cultural, moral, and parental prohibitions against premature engagement in sexual intercourse, then what are the countervailing pressures that teenagers feel that override the inhibitors? Current popular media are of course one source of powerful persuaders. The advertising world (Calvin Klein ads in particular), television soaps, sitcoms, and the film industry present sex without commitment and consequence in highly telescoped relations in which there is a collapsing into a short period of relationships that go from encounter to intercourse in the blink of a camera's eye. Many teenagers, when asked, indicate they believe that television and movies present realistic relationships. (One recent study revealed the naiveté of the age when over half of the teenagers polled indicated that the way sex and its consequences are shown on television is the way it is in real life) (Howard, 75-6). Students who believe
TV accounts of sex are likely to be dissatisfied with their own first experiences (Haffner & Kelly, 31). Peer pressure is possibly the most potent contributor to premature sexual involvement: many studies show that significant numbers of adolescents have engaged in intercourse not because they themselves wanted to but because they felt their partner expected it of them, and they did not know how to refuse (Howard, 75-6). In today's entertainment landscape the question of whether or not to engage in teen sex is merely rhetorical (O'Connor, 15).

Furthermore, the fictional presentation of the stages of sex leave out crucial intervening steps: Doogie and Wanda in the TV sitcom "Doogie Howser, M.D." agonize for a polite period of time over the question of intercourse, kiss, grab the condoms (Doogie is a physician, after all, and safe sex is politically correct for the networks, if virginity is not), and jump into bed, giving the impression that seems universally assumed by too many teenagers: 1. That if there is a moral dimension to sexual intimacy, just hesitating is enough to show one's moral strength; 2. That if I do make a thoughtful decision to have sex, I will also be responsible and protect myself (while statistics show that most teen sex is spontaneous, and only 50% or less of it accompanied by precautionary measures to prevent pregnancy or disease); 3. That the natural successor to kissing is intercourse. How far we have traveled from the fictional landscape of the 1960 film "Where the Boys Are" (a film from the teen years of the current baby boomers and parents generation), a story in which the college girls on spring break in Florida actually resisted the temptations, with the notable exception of the Yvette Mimieux character, whose resulting pregnancy and demise is the cornerstone of the drama.

Schools are guilty, with parents, in not sending the signals needed to be sent to deliver the message that virginity is not only acceptable but also preferable to the alternative. Research shows that although students actually prefer learning about sex from parents (first choice) and teachers (second choice), they in fact learn most from peers and the media (both highly unreliable and unrealistic sources). The crux of the problem with parents is an unwillingness to discuss the issues: only 10% of parents do, beyond just saying, "Don't" (Rodman, Lewis, & Griffith, 70). The crux of the problem in schools lies in two phenomena: the unwillingness of academic faculties to address the issue and come to some consensus on it in the first place, and the substitution of sex education for moral education on the topic of human sexuality. It is rare to find a student handbook that actually proscribes sexual activities: schools are very clear on what to wear (dress codes) but shrink from suggesting not to undress. We can agree that smoking, drinking, and drugs are harmful and dutifully
proscribe those behaviors but are confounded when we attempt to find common
ground to set standards on teen sexual behaviors, largely because there is a
generational disagreement between the younger teachers, themselves products of the
sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies, and their more senior colleagues, whose
experience with the revolution consists primarily in either helpless acquiescence or
quiet revulsion over its path. Thus, the first order of business for schools is for the
adults to meet and to fight it out: to say clearly and unequivocally what the standard
will be within the schools for acceptable sexual behaviors and to agree what is
prudent counseling for individual teachers to give to students who seek advice on the
issues of sexuality. For us to reverse the trend of increasing sexual activity among
teens, we must return to the point in which schools, parents, and the other moral
authorities within the universe of children agree to proselytize abstinence, counsel
postponement, and teach prevention. If we tilt our influence toward the first two
points of the spectrum, then perhaps in more cases our instruction on the third point
will be gratuitous.

It is with instruction on the third point, prevention of pregnancy and STD (sexually
transmitted diseases), that schools flounder time and again because of the misguided
notion that a values-neutral approach to sex education is in fact neutral. On the
contrary, the effect of what we do in sex education in most school programs is to
teach the mechanics of human sexuality without the necessary admonishments about
not turning on the engine so that the implicit message is that because one is of legal
age to drive, it is fine to take the car around the block. Although few would argue that
we should return to the days of general ignorance about human sexuality, increased
familiarity with the mechanics of sexuality has demystified sex to the point of making
it commonplace and, therefore, acceptable in the minds of most teenagers. We know
that education alone is not enough to prevent teens from practicing dangerous and
unhealthful activities: the anti-smoking campaign in schools has been comprehensive,
so much so that everyone knows that cigarette smoking is deleterious to one's health
(and in fact knows that at least from the second grade on). So why is it that the only
subgroup of Americans increasing in the use of cigarettes is the adolescent female
population? Because peer pressure and meretricious advertising both conspire to
suggest that smoking is "cool" and "adult," even somewhat "racy" (The Virginia
Slims'--"You've Come a Long Way, Baby"--modern woman and Camel's swanky--
camel---modern male are attractive icons for kids). Likewise with sex education:
education is not the issue, anymore, since we have successfully inundated kids with
warnings about teenage pregnancy, and STDs, especially AIDS. For the most part,
kids know how pregnancy occurs and know the precautions one “should” take to prevent adverse health consequences. The problem, of course, is that knowledge is not the issue so much as values and decision-making patterns. One might use the alcohol and drug education campaigns to illustrate the point: we tried to educate until we were blue in the face regarding the dangers of adolescent use of alcohol and drugs, but the most effective deterrents were to legislate an older drinking age (18 to 21) and to hold parents, schools, colleges, and universities legally responsible for the Dionysian excesses commonly experienced when teenagers use alcohol or other drugs. At that point, parents and schools began campaigns to change adolescent attitudes and decision-making so that the "I choose not to use" attitude became acceptable. The surprising development of smoke-free and alcohol-free dormitories to choose on an increasing number of campuses reveals the salubrious effect of the shift in attitudes on alcohol and drugs. (Incidentally, one might recommend to teenagers on the subject of use of alcohol the same epigram as for early sexual encounters: to proselytize abstinence, counsel postponement, and teach prevention--of alcoholism, in this case). Unfortunately, just the opposite movement in the schools is taking place in the case of developing attitudes towards early sexual activity: rather than discourage early activity, we implicitly and explicitly encourage it by providing condoms to children. It is with shock that some parents moving their daughters into the coed dorm in which they will live their freshmen year discover that in the concession area, one can purchase condoms from what used to be the cigarette machines. The messages are clear: don't smoke here, but grab a condom with your soft drink and bag of chips, to slake your appetite or to accompany your evening's entertainment. The AIDS epidemic, of course, has dramatized the urgency in the need to educate our children about the dangers of sexual encounters, but since only abstinence is completely safe, and since most teenage intercourse (between 50% and 90% according to different reports) is unprotected, we must realize that the health education argument falls largely on deaf ears.

What, then, is the good counsel parents and teachers should give to adolescents to help them make the choice of virginity?

First, that while we will teach prevention, we favor abstinence and counsel postponement. We might add that for those who have already made the plunge, it is not too late and indeed wise to become abstinent now: better late than never.
Second, that we believe that virginity should be preserved for adulthood or marriage...depending on one's value system. Each of us would define adulthood differently: some by age (18 or 21), some by stage (out of high school and working or in college), some by level of independence ("You are not an adult until you pay your own way," or "the Golden Rule of parenting: he who holds the gold makes the rule"). Adults should be able to agree that adulthood never occurs at 17 or younger, since rare is the teen who is capable of making all the judgments necessary to handle the commitment and consequences of sex at an earlier age.

Third, that there is a hierarchy of expressions of caring and love, steps and stages that should be followed, and that there is no need to rush to intercourse...as the final step when there is plenty of time to arrive there eventually. Although parents and teachers often feel comfortable describing and diagramming the most intimate of genitalia, (since an academic, distanced, clinical approach is non-threatening to all involved), it is the steps of intimacy that we avoid talking about and that need much further exploration by our children. An alumna of a former school of mine once told me that when she was permitted to have a male friend to school, she was only permitted to entertain him in the front parlor, under direct supervision from the headmistress. When her date became particularly adventurous and placed his hand over hers, the headmistress came over to whisper in her ear, "Don't you think you should save something for marriage?" We've come a long way indeed from that quaint attitude, but perhaps too long a way for anyone's well being. Put more graphically for clarity's sake, there are ways of talking, touching, caring, sharing that are very intimate but fall short of invasive, penetrating sexuality, what we should be counseling our children to avoid.

Fourth, that to choose virginity is to take pride in oneself and to manifest strength of character, despite what others may say. One does not have to be a nerd "to choose not to use" alcohol or drugs, just as one does not have to be a prude to choose to abstain from sexual intercourse at too early an age. In fact, "The times, they are a-changing": there are encouraging signs that many students are choosing for a variety of reasons to abstain. Any friendship that is jeopardized by an abstinence choice needs repair in the first place.

It has been my experience and that of many of my colleagues that when an adolescent comes to an adult seeking counsel about sexual experimentation, what the adolescent is most often seeking are ways to say "No." If an adolescent wishes validation to experiment, he or she would go to a peer. The fact of an adolescent's seeking out an
adult on this difficult issue demands an adult response. The ideal becomes to 
proselytize abstinence and teach postponement so that prevention becomes a moot 
point. After all, loss of virginity is just that, a loss teens need not contend with given 
the proper advice and the encouragement to develop their own strong will.

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NOTE: Available in book form: "Reasons To Wait" (the shorter and simpler version of this article for students) and "On Virginity: Notes to Parents and Teachers" (this longer version, with more substantial research and philosophy embedded within it. Both articles are available, respectively, as chapters in books from Avocus Publishing: Losing It: The Virginity Myth (1993), and Looking Ahead: Independent School Issues and Answers (1994). To order, call 1-800-345-6665: ISACS schools can request a 25% discount).

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