

the cult of virginity

“He said it was men invented virginity
not women. Father said it’s like death:
only a state in which others are left...”

W I L L I A M F A U L K N E R,
The Sound and the Fury

IN THE MOMENTS AFTER I FIRST HAD SEX, my then-boyfriend—
lying down next to me over his lint-covered blanket—grabbed a pen from his
nightstand and drew a heart on the wall molding above his bed with our ini-
tials and the date inside. The only way you could see it was by lying flat on the
bed with your head smashed up against the wall. Crooked necks aside, it was a
sweet gesture, one that I’d forgotten about until I started writing this book.

The date seemed so important to us at the time, even though the event
itself was hardly awe-inspiring. There was the expected fumbling, a joke
about his fish-printed boxers, and ensuing condom difficulties. At one point,
his best friend even called to see how things were going. I suppose romance
and discretion are lost on sixteen-year-olds from Brooklyn. Yet we celebrated

our “anniversary” every year until we broke up, when Josh left for college two years before me and met a girl with a lip ring.

I’ve often wondered what that date marks—the day I became a woman? Considering I still bought underwear in cutesy three-packs, and that I certainly hadn’t mastered the art of speaking my mind, I’ve gotta go with no. Societal standards would have me believe that it was the day I became morally sullied, but I fail to see how anything that lasts less than five minutes can have such an indelible ethical impact—so it’s not that, either.

Really, the only meaning it had (besides a little bit of pain and a lot of postcoital embarrassment) was the meaning that Josh and I ascribed to it. Or so I thought. I hadn’t counted on the meaning my peers, my parents, and society would imbue it with on my behalf.

From that date on—in the small, incestuous world of high school friendships, nothing is a secret for long—I was a “sexually active teen,” a term often used in tandem with phrases like “at risk,” or alongside warnings about drug and alcohol use, regardless of how uncontroversial the sex itself may have been. Through the rest of high school, whenever I had a date, my peers assumed that I had had sex because my sexuality had been defined by that one moment when my virginity was lost. It meant that I was no longer discriminating, no longer “good.” The perceived change in my social value wasn’t lost on my parents, either; before I graduated high school, my mother found an empty condom wrapper in my bag and remarked that if I kept having sex, no one would want to marry me.*

I realize that my experience isn’t necessarily representative of most women’s—everyone has their own story—but there are common themes in

* After years of denying she ever said such a thing, to her benefit, my mother finally sheepishly apologized.

so many young women’s sexual journeys. Sometimes it’s shame. Sometimes it’s violence. Sometimes it’s pleasure. And sometimes it’s simply nothing to write home about.

The idea that virginity (or loss thereof) can profoundly affect women’s lives is certainly nothing new. But what virginity is, what it was, and how it’s being used now to punish women and roll back their rights is at the core of the purity myth. Because today, in a world where porn culture and reenergized abstinence movements collide, the moral panic myth about young women’s supposed promiscuity is diverting attention from the real problem—that women are still being judged (sometimes to death) on something that doesn’t really exist: virginity.

THE VIRGINITY MYSTERY

Before Hanne Blank wrote her book *Virgin: The Untouched History*, she had a bit of a problem. Blank was answering teens’ questions on Scarleteen¹—a sex-education website she founded with writer Heather Corinna so that young people could access information about sex online, other than porn and Net Nanny—when she discovered that she kept hitting a roadblock when it came to the topic of virginity.

“One of the questions that kept coming up was ‘I did such-and-such. Am I still a virgin?’” Blank told me in an interview. “They desperately wanted an authoritative answer.”

But she just didn’t have one. So Blank decided to spend some time in Harvard’s medical school library to find a definitive answer for her young web browsers.

“I spent about a week looking through everything I could—medical dictionaries, encyclopedias, anatomies—trying to find some sort of diagnostic standard for virginity,” Blank said.

The problem was, there was no standard. Either a book wouldn't mention virginity at all or it would provide a definition that wasn't medical, but subjective.

"Then it dawned on me—I'm in arguably one of the best medical libraries in the world, scouring their stacks, and I'm not finding anything close to a medical definition for virginity. And I thought, *That's really weird. That's just flat-out strange.*"

Blank said she found it odd mostly because everyone, including doctors, talks about virginity as if they know what it is—but no one ever bothers to mention the truth: "People have been talking authoritatively about virginity for thousands of years, yet we don't even have a working medical definition for it!"

Blank now refers to virginity as "the state of having not had partnered sex." But if virginity is simply the first time someone has sex, then what is sex? If it's just heterosexual intercourse, then we'd have to come to the fairly ridiculous conclusion that all lesbians and gay men are virgins, and that different kinds of intimacy, like oral sex, mean nothing. And even using the straight-intercourse model of sex as a gauge, we'd have to get into the down-and-dirty conversation of what constitutes penetration.*

Since I've become convinced that virginity is a sham being perpetrated against women, I decided to turn to other people to see how they "count" sex. Most say it's penetration. Some say it's oral sex. My closest friend, Kate, a lesbian, has the best answer to date (a rule I've followed since she shared it with

* My college roommate Jen and I, I'm somewhat ashamed to admit, had a three pumps or more rule. Less than three pumps? You didn't have to count it as sex. We thought it was genius, as the three pump chumps, as we called them, were not necessarily the guys you wanted to remember.

me): It isn't sex unless you've had an orgasm. That's a pleasure-based, non-heteronormative way of marking intimacy if I've ever heard one. Of course, this way of defining sex isn't likely to be very popular among the straight-male sect, given that some would probably end up not counting for many of their partners.

But any way you cut it, virginity is just too subjective to pretend we can define it.

Laura Carpenter, a professor at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, told me that when she wrote her book, she was loath to even use the word "virginity," lest she propagate the notion that there's one concrete definition for it.²

"What is this thing, this social phenomenon? I think the emphasis put on virginity, particularly for women, causes a lot more harm than good," said Carpenter.³

This has much to do with the fact that "virgin" is almost always synonymous with "woman." Virgin sacrifices, popping cherries, white dresses, supposed vaginal tightness, you name it. Outside of the occasional reference to the male virgin in the form of a goofy movie about horny teenage boys, virginity is pretty much all about women. Even the dictionary definitions of "virgin" cite an "unmarried girl or woman" or a "religious woman, esp. a saint."⁴ No such definition exists for men or boys.

It's this inextricable relationship between sexual purity and women—how we're either virgins or not virgins—that makes the very concept of virginity so dangerous and so necessary to do away with.

Admittedly, it would be hard to dismiss virginity as we know it altogether, considering the meaning it has in so many people's—especially women's—lives. When I suggest that virginity is a lie told to women, I don't aim to discount or make light of how important the current social idea of vir-

ginity is for some people. Culture, religion, and social beliefs influence the role that virginity and sexuality play in women's lives—sometimes very positively. So, to be clear, when I argue for an end to the idea of virginity, it's because I believe sexual intimacy should be honored and respected, but that it shouldn't be revered at the expense of women's well-being, or seen as such an integral part of female identity that we end up defining ourselves by our sexuality.

I also can't discount that no matter what personal meaning each woman gives virginity, it's people who have social and political influence who ultimately get to decide what virginity means—at least, as it affects women on a large scale.

VIRGINITY: COMMODITY, MORALITY, OR FARCE?
It's hard to know when people started caring about virginity, but we do know that men, or male-led institutions, have always been the ones that get to define and assign value to virginity.

Blank posits that a long-standing historical interest in virginity is about establishing paternity (if a man marries a virgin, he can be reasonably sure the child she bears is his) and about using women's sexuality as a commodity. Either way, the notion has always been deeply entrenched in patriarchy and male ownership.

Raising daughters of quality became another model of production, as valuable as breeding healthy sheep, weaving sturdy cloth, or bringing in a good harvest.

... The gesture is now generally symbolic in the first world, but we nonetheless still observe the custom of the father "giving" his daughter in marriage.

Up until the last century or so, however, when laws were liberalized to allow women to stand as full citizens in their own right, this represented a literal transfer of property from a father's household to a husband's.⁵

That's why women who had sex were (and still are, at times) referred to as "damaged goods"—because they were literally just that: something to be owned, traded, bought, and sold.

But long gone are the days when women were property... or so we'd like to think. It's not just wedding traditions or outdated laws that name women's virginity as a commodity; women's virginity, our sexuality, is still assigned a value by a movement with more power and influence in American society than we'd probably like to admit.

I like to call this movement the virginity movement.* And it is a movement, indeed—with conservatives and evangelical Christians at the helm, and our government, school systems, and social institutions taking orders. Composed of antifeminist think tanks like the Independent Women's Forum and Concerned Women for America; abstinence-only "educators" and organizations; religious leaders; and legislators with regressive social values, the virginity movement is much more than just the same old sexism; it's a targeted and well-funded backlash that is rolling back women's rights using revamped and modernized definitions of purity, morality, and sexuality. Its goals are mired in old-school gender roles, and the tool it's using is young women's sexuality. (What better way to get people to pay attention to your cause than to frame it in terms of teenage girls' having, or not having, sex? It's salacious!)

And, like it or not, the members of the virginity movement are the people who are defining virginity—and, to a large extent, sexuality—in America. Now, instead of women's virginity being explicitly bought and

* The "abstinence movement" would be accurate, as would the "chastity movement." But neither quite captures how this obsession really is about virginity, virgins, and an almost too-enthusiastic focus on young women's sexuality. So the "virginity movement" seemed not only appropriate, but also a bit needling. Which I enjoy.

sold with dowries and business deals, it's being defined as little more than a stand-in for actual morality.

It's genius, really. Shame women into being chaste and tell them that all they have to do to be "good" is not have sex. (Of course, chastity and purity, as defined by the virginity movement, are not just about abstaining sexually so much as they're about upholding a specific, passive model of womanhood. But more on this later.)

For women especially, virginity has become the easy answer—the morality quick fix. You can be vapid, stupid, and unethical, but so long as you've never had sex, you're a "good" (i.e., "moral") girl and therefore worthy of praise.

Present-day American society—whether through pop culture, religion, or institutions—conflates sexuality and morality constantly. Idolizing virginity as a stand-in for women's morality means that nothing else matters—not what we accomplish, not what we think, not what we care about and work for. Just if/how/whom we have sex with. That's all.

Just look at the women we venerate for not having sex: pageant queens who run on abstinence platforms, pop singers who share their virginal status, and religious women who "save themselves" for marriage. It's an interesting state of affairs when women have to simply do, well, *nothing* in order to be considered ethical role models. As Feministing.com commenter electron-Blue noted in response to the 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article "Students of Virginity," on abstinence clubs at Ivy League colleges, "There were a WHOLE LOTTA us not having sex at Harvard . . . but none of us thought that that was special enough to start a club about it, for pete's sake."⁶

But for plenty of women across the country, it is special. Staying "pure" and "innocent" is touted as the greatest thing we can do. However, equating

this inaction with morality not only is problematic because it continues to tie women's ethics to our bodies, but also is downright insulting because it suggests that women can't be moral actors. Instead, we're defined by what we don't do—our ethics are the ethics of passivity. (This model of ethics fits in perfectly with how the virginity movement defines the ideal woman.)

Proponents of chastity and abstinence, though, would have us believe that abstaining indeed requires strength and action. Janie Fredell, one of the students quoted in the above-mentioned *New York Times Magazine* piece, penned a college newspaper article claiming that virginity is "rooted . . . in the notion of strength."

"It takes a strong woman to be abstinent, and that's the sort of woman I want to be," Fredell told the magazine.⁷ Her rhetoric of strength is part of a growing trend among the conservative virginity-fetish sect, which is likely the result of virginity movement leaders seeing how questionable the "passive virgin" is in modern society. Now we're seeing virginity proponents assert their fortitude. Conservative messages aimed at young men even call on them to be "virginity warriors," driving home the message that it's men's responsibility to safeguard virginity for their female counterparts, simultaneously quashing any fears of feminization that boys may have surrounding abstinence.

Perhaps it's true that in our sex-saturated culture, it does take a certain amount of self-discipline to resist having sex, but restraint does not equal morality. And let's be honest: If this were simply about resisting peer pressure and being strong, then the women who have sex because they actively want to—as appalling as that idea might be to those who advocate abstinence—wouldn't be scorned. Because the "strength" involved in these women's choice would be about doing what they want despite pressure to

the contrary, not about resisting the sex act itself. But women who have sex are often denigrated by those who revere virginity. As feminist blogger Jill Filipovic noted in response to Fredell:

I appreciate and applaud the personal strength of individuals who decide abstinence is the best choice for them. But what I can't support is the constant attacks on sexually active people. People who have sex do not feel a constant need to tell abstinent people that their human dignity has been compromised, or that they're dirty, or that they are secretly unhappy, or that they're headed for total life ruin.⁸

And that is exactly what young women are taught, thanks in no small part to conservative backlash. In 2005, for example, the evangelical Christian group Focus on the Family came out with a study reporting that having sex before the age of eighteen makes you more likely to end up poor and divorced.⁹ Given that the median age for sexual initiation for all Americans—male and female—is seventeen, I wonder how shocked most women will be when they learn that they have a life of poverty-stricken spinsterhood to look forward to!

But it's not only abstinence education or conservative propaganda that are perpetuating this message; you need look no further than pop culture for stark examples of how young people—especially young women—are taught to use virginity as an easy ethical road map.

A 2007 episode of the MTV documentary series *True Life* featured celibate youth.¹⁰ Among the teens choosing to abstain because of disease concerns and religious commitments was nineteen-year-old Kristin from Nashville, Tennessee. Kristin had cheated on her past boyfriends, and told

the camera she'd decided to remain celibate until she feels she can be faithful to her current boyfriend. Clearly, Kristin's problem isn't sex—it's trust. But instead of dealing with the actual issues behind her relationship woes, this young woman was able to circumvent any real self-analysis by simply claiming to be abstinent. So long as she's chaste, she's good.

Or consider singer and reality television celebrity Jessica Simpson, who has made her career largely by playing on the sexy-virgin stereotype. Simpson, the daughter of a Baptist youth minister, started her singing career by touring Christian youth festivals and True Love Waits events. Even when she went mainstream, she publicly declared her virginity—stating that her father had given her a promise ring when she was twelve years old—and spoke of her intention to wait to have sex until marriage. Meanwhile, not surprisingly, Simpson was being marketed as a major sex symbol—all blond hair, breasts, and giggles. Especially giggles. Simpson's character (and I use the word "character" because it's hard to know what was actually her and not a finely honed image) was sold as the archetypal dumb blond. Thoughtless moments on *Newlyweds*, the MTV show that followed her short-lived marriage to singer Nick Lachey, became nationally known sound bites, such as Simpson's wondering aloud whether tuna was chicken or fish, since the can read "Chicken of the Sea."

Despite Simpson's public persona as an airhead (as recently as 2008, she was featured in a Macy's commercial as not understanding how to flick on a light switch), women are supposed to want to be her, not only because she's beautiful by conventional standards, but also because she adheres to the social structures that tell women that they exist purely for men: as a virgin, as a sex symbol, or, in Simpson's case, as both. It doesn't matter that Simpson reveals few of her actual thoughts or moral beliefs; it's enough that she's "pure," even if that purity means she's a bit of a dolt.

For those women who can't keep up the front as well as someone like Simpson, they suffer heaps of judgment—especially when they fall off the pedestal they're posed upon so perfectly. American pop culture, especially, has an interesting new trend of venerating and fetishizing “pure” young women—whether they're celebrities, beauty queens, or just everyday young women—simply to bask in their eventual fall.

And no one embodies the “perfect” young American woman like beauty queens. They're pretty, overwhelmingly white, thin, and eager to please.* And, of course, pageant queens are supposed to be as pure as pure can be. In fact, until 1999, the Miss America pageant had a “purity rule” that barred divorced women and those who had obtained abortions from entering the contest—lest they sully the competition, I suppose.¹¹

So in 2006, when two of those “perfect” girls made the news for being in scandalous photos on the Internet, supposed promiscuity, or a combination thereof, Americans were transfixed.

First, twenty-year-old Miss USA Tara Conner was nearly stripped of her title after reports surfaced that she frequented nightclubs, drank, and dated. Hardly unusual behavior for a young woman, regardless of how many tiaras she may have.

The *New York Daily News* could barely contain its slut-shaming glee when it reported on the story: “She really is a small-town girl. She just went wild when she came to the city,” one nightlife veteran said. ‘Tara just couldn't handle herself. They were sneaking those [nightclub] guys in and out of the

* Who, after all, can maintain a pearly white perma-grin through humiliating bathing suit competitions and inane questions—all for scholarships that are paltry in comparison to the money spent on gowns and coaches—other than women looking for some serious validation?

apartment’ . . . Conner still brought boyfriends home. . . . Soon she broke up with her hometown fiancé and started dating around in the Manhattan nightclub world. . . .”¹²

Instead of having her crown taken away, however, Conner was publicly “forgiven” by Miss USA co-owner Donald Trump, who appeared at a press conference to publicly declare he was giving the young woman a second chance.¹³ In case you had any doubts about whether this controversy was all tied up with male ownership and approval, consider the fact that Trump later reportedly considered giving his permission for Conner to pose for *Playboy* magazine. He played the role of dad, pimp, and owner, all rolled into one.¹⁴

Mere days later, Miss Nevada USA, twenty-two-year-old Katie Rees, was dethroned after pictures of her exposing one of her breasts and mooning the camera were uncovered.¹⁵ When you're on a pedestal, you have a long way to fall.

And, of course, it's impossible to talk about tipped-over pedestals without mentioning pop singer Britney Spears. Spears, first made famous by her hit song “Baby One More Time” and its accompanying video, in which she appeared in a Catholic schoolgirl mini-uniform, was very much the American purity princess. She publicly declared her virginity and belief in abstinence before marriage, all the while being marketed—much like Simpson was—as a sex symbol. But unlike Simpson, Spears fell far from grace in the eyes of the American public. The most obvious indications of her decline were splashed across newspapers and entertainment weeklies worldwide—a breakdown during which she shaved her head in front of photographers, and various pictures of her drunk and sans panties. But Spears began distancing herself from the virgin ideal long before these incidents hit the tabloids.

First, Spears got some press for moving in with then-boyfriend and

fellow pop star Justin Timberlake. But the sexist brouhaha began in earnest when Spears was no longer considered “attractive,” because she started to gain weight, got pregnant, and no longer looked like a little girl. Pictures of her cellulite popped up on websites and gossip magazines nationwide, along with guesstimations about her weight and jokes about her stomach. Because “purity” isn’t just about not having sex, it’s about not being a woman—and instead being in a state of perpetual girlhood (more on this in Chapter 3).

Shaming young women for being sexual is nothing new, but it’s curious to observe how the expectation of purity gets played out through the women who are supposed to epitomize the feminine ideal: the “desirable” virgin. After all, we rarely see women who aren’t conventionally beautiful idolized for their abstinence. And no matter how “good” you are otherwise—even if you’re an all-American beauty queen—if you’re not virginal, you’re shamed.

The desirable virgin is sexy but not sexual. She’s young, white, and skinny. She’s a cheerleader, a baby sitter; she’s accessible and eager to please (remember those ethics of passivity!). She’s never a woman of color. She’s never a low-income girl or a fat girl. She’s never disabled. “Virgin” is a designation for those who meet a certain standard of what women, especially younger women, are supposed to look like. As for how these young women are supposed to act? A blank slate is best.

SELLING VIRGINITY

Unfortunately, this morality model of virginity—in which women’s morals and ethical ability are defined solely by their sexual status—isn’t the only type the virginity movement is pushing. Viewing virginity as a commodity—as it was seen back in the days in which daughters were exchanged as property—lives on, just in less obvious ways (though, arguably, much more insidiously).

Now fathers participate in purity balls and virginity pledges to maintain ownership over their daughters, even if it’s only symbolic. Women’s sexuality is still very much for sale.

Not so shockingly to those of us who do feminist and progressive political work, the conservative, religious right has been at the center of keeping women’s bodies on the market. The backlash against women’s rights over the past three decades has ranged from rolling back our reproductive rights to launching antisexuality scare-tactic campaigns—all part of a larger concerted effort desperately seeking a return to traditional gender roles. Make no mistake about it—these efforts are at the heart of the virginity movement and its goals.

And they’ve been successful. To a large extent, the virginity movement is the new authority on sexuality. It’s in our schools, telling our children what sex is (dirty, wrong, and dangerous), and in our homes, creating legislation that violates women’s privacy and bodies (more on this in Chapter 6).

In addition to promoting the virginity-as-morality model, the virginity movement is working hard to reaffirm virginity as something to be bought, sold, and owned. Sometimes these attempts transpire in more obvious ways than others.

Take, for example, Virginity Vouchers. Sold to abstinence educators as abstinence commitment cards to hand out to students, these vouchers, which look much like credit cards, feature a background image of a bride and groom with the words VIRGINITY VOUCHER: DON’T BUY THE LIE, SAVE SEX FOR MARRIAGE emblazoned across it. The Abstinence Clearinghouse, the largest and best-known abstinence education nonprofit organization in the country, sells the card on its website and makes no effort to hide the fact that this product is, quite literally, commodifying virginity:

*This "Virginity Voucher" is a hard plastic commitment card with a place on the back to sign their name. Created for both young men and women, this card can be kept in their wallet to remind them of their decision!*¹⁶

Right along with their MasterCards and Visas!

Or consider another abstinence product: a gold rose pin handed out in schools and at Christian youth events. The pin is attached to a small card that reads, "You are like a beautiful rose. Each time you engage in pre-marital sex, a precious petal is stripped away. Don't leave your future husband holding a bare stem. Abstain."¹⁷

Do we really want to teach our daughters that without their virginity, they're nothing but a "bare stem"?

Abstinence-only education (see Chapter 5), which receives more than \$178 million a year in federal funding, is chock full of lessons like these that tell students that female sexuality is a "gift," "precious," and something to "save."

A 2008 advertisement promoting Abstinence Awareness Week in Washington, D.C., told young women to "guard your diamond" alongside a picture of a tremendous gem covered in chains and a lock.¹⁸

And, of course, there are purity balls—the federally funded father/daughter dances where girls as young as age six pledge their virginity to their dads, who in turn pledge to hang on to said virginity until an appropriate husband comes along, to whom the fathers can transfer ownership of their daughters.

Not all of the virginity-for-sale messages are so overt, but all of them are sexist and all of them are dangerous. Why? Because if virginity is a gift, or something "worth saving," that means that those who don't save it are somehow lacking—or, even worse, sullied.

Sex-as-dirty and women-as-tainted messages are central to the virgin-

ity movement and are perpetuated most visibly in the most unfortunate of places—our schools. The primary perpetrator, abstinence-only education, has established programs across the country to tell young women that they're somehow spoiled by sex.

One popular classroom exercise, for example, employs Scotch Tape to demonstrate how premarital sex can make girls dirty.* A teacher holds up a clear strip of tape, meant to represent a girl, in front of the class. The teacher then puts the strip of tape, adhesive side down, on the arm of a boy in the class, to symbolize his sexual relationship with the girl. The teacher rips off the tape (signifying the breakup, apparently) and holds it up again for the class to look at. Students are meant to see that the strip of tape—the girl—has picked up all kinds of dirt and hair from the boy's arm and is no longer clean. Then, when the teacher tries to stick the same strip of tape to another boy's arm, he or she notes that it doesn't stick—they can't bond! To end things with a bang, the abstinence educator makes a remark about the girl's being "used" and therefore unable to have strong future relationships.¹⁹

In another popular exercise, abstinence teachers' use candy to make their "dirty" points. These candy exercises often consist of teachers' showing how the candy can't fit back into its wrapper after being chewed/sucked/eaten. Another program in Nevada even used its abstinence-only state funding to run public radio service ads that said girls will feel "dirty and cheap" after having sex. (The ads were later pulled due to listener outrage.²⁰) The fact that these examples nearly always focus on girls is no coincidence. After all, our bodies are the ones that get objectified and pathologized, and it's our morality that's supposedly in jeopardy.

* Most classroom exercises focus on girls and their potential filthiness.

But sullied students across America shouldn't fret! The virginity movement has ensured that there's a way out of the dirt trap: Megan Landry of Houma, Louisiana, signed a "Pure Love Promise" commitment card when she was sixteen years old while attending Abbey Youth Fest, a Louisiana event for young Catholics. The card, which she signed, dated, and carried in her wallet, reads, "Believing that sex is sacred, I promise to God that I will save the gift of my sexuality from now until marriage. I choose to glorify God with my body and pursue a life of purity, trusting that the Lord is never outdone in generosity."²¹

As it turns out, Landry had already lost her virginity to a boyfriend when she was in the tenth grade, but she was moved to sign the card anyway after hearing one of the event speakers, Jason Evert, author of *Pure Love*.

"[Evert] gave a talk about purity and saving yourself for marriage. He told us about how he had waited until he was married for sex, but his fiancée had already slept with someone. They both decided to not sleep with each other—he took a pledge and his girlfriend took a secondary virginity pledge. I just thought that was sooooo sweeeet," Landry wrote in an email to me.

The notion of secondary virginity—that you can regain your spiritual and emotional purity by pledging abstinence until marriage, no matter what your sexual history—first became popular in the mid-1980s among conservative Christian groups.²² Also called born-again virginity, the notion is widespread in Christian programs for young people, abstinence-only education, and even pop culture.

Perhaps sensing that the number of teen virgins in the United States was diminishing, religious groups saw secondary virginity as their opportunity to (for lack of a better term) put more asses in the seats. What better way to increase the numbers of virginity pledgers than to open up the process

to everyone—even the promiscuous! It's possible that the virginity movement even recognized that the purity standard of not having intercourse was simply unrealistic, and saw how promoting a promise that focused on emotional and spiritual purity might woo those who felt ostracized by their virginityless status.

What I find interesting about secondary virginity is that while it may seem like an easy out, with its emphasis on emotional and spiritual purity, it actually takes a hardline approach to chastity and has the effect of increasing the obstacles to being pure. After all, to be a virgin, all you have to do is not have sex. But to fully embrace your secondary virginity, you must abstain not only from intercourse, but also from masturbation or even thinking about sex. And there's no more of this "anything but" nonsense, either—Love Matters, a teen abstinence program, tells those considering being secondary virgins to "avoid intense hugging," and that "anything beyond a brief, simple kiss can quickly become dangerous."²³

Some groups even advise women to change the way they act and dress to convey their chastity appropriately. An article from Focus on the Family, "Pure Again," notes that "women find they want to try a different way of dressing—to show more respect for their own bodies."²⁴

Despite efforts to link secondary virginity to teens' emotional and spiritual selves, the virginity movement's obsession with bodily purity is impossible to hide. Undercutting the movement's argument that purity is about spirituality is the fact that many of the secondary-virginity and chastity messages come from crisis pregnancy centers, groups that masquerade

* As with most things in the virginity movement, there's a lot of lip service when it comes to young men and secondary or born-again virginity, but the focus remains on women.

as medical clinics when their actual purpose is to convince young women not to have abortions. What could be more intimately tied with women's bodies and sexuality than pregnancy? And, let's face it, the language of secondary virginity isn't exactly subtle. On the website for A Pregnancy Resource Center of Northeast Ohio, an article titled "Take2" asks, "Have you already unwrapped the priceless gift of virginity and given it away? Do you now feel like 'second-hand goods' and no longer worthy to be cherished? Do you ever wish you could re-wrap it and give it only to your future husband or wife?"²⁵

But not to worry, there's an answer! "Guess what? You can be abstinent again! You can't change the past, but you can change the future. You can decide today to commit to abstinence, wrapping a brand-new gift of virginity to present to your husband or wife on your wedding night."²⁶

The message is clear: Without your "gift," you're "second-hand goods." (Or at least, if you're properly repentant, that's what you should feel like.)

Like most virginity pledges, the appeal of secondary virginity doesn't seem to last long. Landry, the secondary virginity-pledging teen from Louisiana, broke her pledge within the year:

As the months went by, I gradually stopped hanging out with my religious friends and got a serious boyfriend," she said. "About eight months after I signed the pledge, on New Year's Eve, I had no use for that card anymore. We dated for about one month before we had sex. After this relationship, I had no interest in abstinence and purity pledges. I was over it.

Landry is not alone in being "over it." Like first-time virginity pledgers, secondary virginity pledgers are likely to abandon their promise, and

even more likely to not use contraception.* Another young virginity pledger, Emily Seipel of Michigan, even told me that her high school virginity pledge was "an easy [way] to resist flesh sins when you're already a closeted lesbian." (Gay people don't exist in the virginity movement, remember?) Seipel, who is technically still a virgin by conventional standards, is far from alone. The purity that the virginity movement is working so hard for is more of an illusion than it would like to own up to. Teens who make these pledges often do so in front of church members, peers, parents, and community leaders, and oftentimes they have no real choice in the matter. It's not as if many twelve- to fourteen-year-olds are going to be self-assured enough to refuse to take a chastity vow. ("No thanks, Mom, I'd like to keep my sexual options open!") These pledges are little more than cultural farces created to make parents feel better about their children's coming of age. And, frankly, parents who buy into the purity myth need some hope; after all, mainstream media would have them believe that their daughters are going wild and are perhaps irredeemably tainted (more on this in Chapter 2).

Whether they're pledges, bare stems, or Virginity Vouchers, the messages are clearly regressive. But virginity proponents are doing one heck of a job marketing them as "revolutionary" and "empowering." Appropriating feminist rhetoric to reinforce traditional gender roles is nothing if not brilliant.

Wendy Shalit, a writer and virginity guru whose first book, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering Lost Virtue*, was the topic of much debate when it was released in 2000, is a prime player in the "making abstinence cool" movement (or, as she calls it, the "modesty movement"). Shalit, who in 2007 penned

* Contraception is for "bad" girls who planned out sex, not girls who got caught in the heat of the moment. And, of course, many of these teens are taught that birth control doesn't work anyway, so why bother?

another ode to chastity, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, founded a website, the Modesty Zone,²⁷ and a blog, Modestly Yours,²⁸ which has twenty-one in-house bloggers. The site describes itself as “an informal community of young women who don’t have a voice in the mainstream media.”

“Whether you’re a virgin waiting until marriage, or just against casual sex more generally, you can find a safe harbour here to share your ideals, interests, and goals for the future,” it reads. The Modesty Zone features “Rebels of the Month” and slogans like “Be Daring, keep your shirt on!” Of course, the core message of the modesty movement is still in plain view, as evidenced by the blog’s tagline: “Modesty Zone: A site for good girls.”

Some virginity-movement members are even resorting to using sex to sell their antisex message. A shirt being sold on the website of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Christian organization, says, VIRGINS ARE HOT, and groups on Facebook dedicated to the same message call their own work “passion for purity.”

What’s most telling about all of these efforts, whether they’re being executed via education, religion, or social imperatives, is that they’re not working—at least, not in the ways the movement would like them to. Virginity pledges have proved ineffective time and time again; the same is true of abstinence-only education.²⁹ Blogs like Shalit’s Modesty Zone have little web traffic,³⁰ and the purity groups on social-networking sites are dwarfed by groups like “This is what a feminist looks like” or even those as trivial as “If You Can’t Differentiate Between ‘Your’ and ‘You’re’ You Deserve To Die.”

Despite its inability to keep women “pure,” or to convince most Americans that abstinence is best, the virginity movement is strong, well funded, and everywhere. While there isn’t a critical mass of young people who iden-

tify with this movement, that doesn’t mean they aren’t affected by it; these are the people who are teaching our kids about sex and teaching our daughters about morality. And what they’re teaching them is wrong.

Abstinence-only classes are part of the reason why one in four young American women have a sexually transmitted infection (STI),³¹ and are certainly to blame for the disturbing revelation that teens in Florida believe drinking a cap of bleach will prevent HIV, and a shot of Mountain Dew will stop pregnancy.³² These are the organizations with billboards peppered across America’s highways telling young women, WAIT FOR THE BLING and THE ULTIMATE WEDDING GIFT IS YOUR VIRGINITY.³³

All of these messages—which position certain young women as the ideal, substitute sexual purity for real morality, and commodify virginity—are part of a larger effort to roll back all women’s rights. The virginity movement is seeking a return to traditional gender roles, and focusing on purity is the vehicle toward that end.

When I emailed my high school ex to let him know about this book, I asked him about our first time and what he took away from the experience. Like mine, his memories were wrought with uncomfortable moments* and questions. He remembers writing the date above his bed as a way to add permanence to a fleeting moment. I was surprised to learn, however, that his views about women’s sexuality weren’t any more sophisticated than what I remembered them to be during our teenage years.

“No matter how sexually curious or ‘ready’ a girl is, she seems to be able to keep her wits about her a bit better than her male counterparts, so more is expected of [women], and rightly so,” Josh wrote to me. This is an all-too-

* Like his trying to hold back by staring at a bottle of Drakkar Noir cologne and attempting to spell the name backward.

common assertion—the idea that women are somehow less sexual than men and are therefore the gatekeepers of sexual morals. It's a fundamental notion of the virginity movement, however, so I shouldn't have been so shocked to hear this line of reasoning being regurgitated by my former boyfriend. After all, the purity message is widespread. But it's one thing to hear the media use this type of language about Britney Spears; it was quite another to hear an ex-boyfriend use it about me. At the end of the day, though, it *is* about me—it's about all of us. However theoretically we'd like to discuss issues of virginity, purity, and women's moral value, the fact is, they affect all of us.

classroom chastity

“Each time a sexually active person gives that most personal part of himself or herself away, that person can lose a sense of personal value and worth. It all comes down to self-respect.”

from the abstinence-only teachers' guide

CHOOSING THE BEST PATH ¹

PAM STENZEL HAS A ROOMFUL of teenagers laughing up a storm. In her educational video *Sex Has a Price Tag*, Stenzel cracks jokes while being engaging, authoritative, and convincing. Amidst her quips about sex and annoying parents, she tells the students—packed into what looks like a school auditorium—that birth control could kill them and that abortion can lead to anorexia and suicide. She follows with another joke, and the teens laugh some more.

For schools that can't afford Stenzel's \$5,000 speaking fee, this video is the perfect substitute—part of an abstinence arsenal of dozens of DVDs, books, and brochures available on ShopPamStenzel.com. Stenzel is just one

of hundreds of abstinence educators who speak in schools, churches, community groups—even government agencies—nationwide.

Another one of these educators is Christian comedian Keith Deltano, who performs his abstinence routine at Virginia high schools. His shtick involves tying up a male volunteer from the audience and dangling a cinder block precariously over his genital area to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of condoms against HIV/AIDS.^{2*} Alabama-based speaker Janice Turner, who founded Power of Purity classes, explained her classroom philosophy to a reporter recently by saying, “Girls give in to sex not because they want sex—it’s like a hug. If they can get that from their fathers, they won’t need it from a boyfriend.”[†]

These are the virginity movement’s front-liners, spreading the purity message in force.

Abstinence-only education—which includes sex education curricula, speakers like Stenzel and friends, peer educators, and various kinds of abstinence events[#]—is arguably the virginity movement’s most successful venture to date. It’s widespread, well funded, and becoming more and more mainstream—but not without consequences. The pervasiveness of abstinence-only programs ensures that a generation of young Americans has been indoctrinated not only with messages about how wrong, dirty, and immoral premarital sex is, but also with subjective—and often false—information: that contraception is ineffective (and sometimes dangerous), abortion is wrong, and any sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to make them diseased, poor, depressed, and suicidal.

* I’m betting the actual lesson learned is to steer clear of bad comics brandishing bricks.

† There are lots of things I imagine young girls would like to get from their dads—a phone call, advice about what to get their mom on her birthday, a pizza and ice-cream night—but I’m guessing a stand-in for sex isn’t one of them.

Like purity balls or a visit from the local crisis pregnancy center!

THE ANATOMY OF ABSTINENCE

In Jeniann’s ninth-grade sex ed class in Virginia Beach, Virginia, her teacher told her and her fellow students that it was against the law to have premarital sex.

“She told us if we did it and were caught, we could face fines, probation, and possibly jail time,” Jeniann, now sixteen, emailed me.

“She said it had to be illegal because premarital sex undermines the family, which is a necessary thing in society.”

Morgan Dickens, a twenty-two-year-old woman I met while visiting Cornell University in upstate New York, told me that at her San Antonio, Texas, high school, teachers weren’t even allowed to *mention* words that related to anything but abstinence.

“Our biology teacher told us she couldn’t say anything about birth control when a girl asked how it worked.” Dickens also recalled that a student in her health class was actually kicked out of the room and asked to sit outside because he mentioned something about STIs and using a condom.

Many of the young people I’ve spoken to—whether via email, through Feministing.com, or on college campuses—have told me how abstinence programs use fear- and shame-based tactics to spread their misinformation. Katelyn Bradley of Florida, for example, wrote me an email detailing her middle school health class’s exercise on abstinence: “They asked for several volunteers, and the woman leading the discussing held a wrapped gift. We weren’t supposed to give away this gift until after marriage. If we had sex before marriage, our special present (sexuality) would be ruined. They literally demonstrated this notion in front of the class by passing it along the line of volunteers, with each person stomping on the wrapped gift.” I suppose if this educator thinks having premarital sex is akin to being stomped on, I can’t really hold her abstinence leanings against her.

Cassandra Tapia, a twenty-one-year-old from Dallas, emailed me about her seventh-grade abstinence-class teacher, who started one of her lessons by yelling, “Sex feels good!”

“She also made us say it,” Tapia told me. “Then she told us a story about ‘Ken’ and ‘Barbie,’ using Velcro gloves as visuals. She talked about how Ken and Barbie dated and hung out, and then—with a dramatic slamming of the Velcroed hands together—had sex. Then she showed us how it was possible to separate her hands, but it was difficult and made a painful ripping noise.”

Sadly, these young women’s experiences aren’t anomalous. It’s not only oddball teachers who are lying to and intimidating students; these tactics are written into schools’ curricula. A 2004 report from Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) indicated that over 80 percent of federally funded abstinence programs contain false or misleading information about sex and reproductive health.³

The report found that all of the curricula studied failed to provide information on how to select a birth control method and use it properly; that it greatly exaggerated the failure rate of condoms in pregnancy prevention; and that it flat-out propagated inaccuracies by discounting (or even outright denying) condoms’ effectiveness in preventing STD and HIV transmission. According to the report:

One curriculum draws an analogy between the HIV virus and a penny and compares it to a sperm cell (“Speedy the Sperm”), which on the same scale would be almost 19 feet long. The curriculum asks, “If the condom has a failure rate of 14% in preventing ‘Speedy’ from getting through to create a new life, what happens if this guy (penny) gets through? You have a death: your own.”⁴

Other curricula provided false information about pregnancy risks in sexual activity outside of intercourse—one text even states that merely touching another person’s genitals can cause pregnancy. The bad science and misleading statistics go on and on: One program teaches that HIV can be transmitted through tears, while another falsely links abortion with sterility, mental retardation, and premature births in future pregnancies.⁵

Martha Kempner, vice president of information and communications at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), a New York–based organization that advocates for accurate and comprehensive education on sex and reproductive health, told me that this type of misinformation is just the tip of the abstinence iceberg. “They’re attacking a way of living, and their brand of sex ed has very little to do with sex—it’s a social message.”

SIECUS has been keeping track of abstinence-only education programs and dissecting their curricula for years, and some of the teachings the organization has found aren’t just wrong—they’re terrifying. One commonly used book says, “Relying on condoms is like playing Russian roulette.”⁶ Another reads, “AIDS can be transmitted by skin-to-skin contact.”⁷

These programs aren’t just spreading medical and scientific misinformation, either—they’re also sending social and values-based messages. A popular abstinence text, “Sex Respect,” warns students of the dire consequences of premarital sex: “[I]f you eat spoiled food, you will get sick. If you jump from a tall building, you will be hurt or killed. If you spend more money than you make, your enslavement to debt affects you and those whom you love. If you have sex outside of marriage, there are consequences for you, your partner, and society.”⁸

“This is a social agenda masquerading as teen pregnancy prevention,”

Kempner said. “They’re going so far backwards on the messages they’re giving women—that purity is the most important thing and what you should be striving for is a wedding. Saying that the most important thing you can do is get married and have children isn’t the most empowering message.”

Empowerment is indeed not the goal of abstinence-only curricula, which are built on outdated notions of gender norms and sexist stereotypes about sexuality and relationships, and ultimately seek a return to traditional gender norms. The virginity movement has a captive audience in middle school and high school classes, and it’s planning on using that to its full advantage—why stop at condom-failure rates when you can fit a whole ideology in there?

The social messages of abstinence-only education are nothing if not old school. Women are often described as weak, intellectually inferior, and needing men’s financial and physical protection.

In Waxman’s report, one text was said to have listed “financial support” as one of the “5 Major Needs of Women,” and “domestic support” as one of the “5 Major Needs of Men.”⁹ Another describes how girls don’t “focus” as well as boys: “Generally, guys are able to focus better on one activity at a time and may not connect feelings with actions. Girls access both sides of the brain at once, so they often experience feelings and emotions as part of every situation.”¹⁰

The pivotal moment for me—the moment when I realized how little abstinence proponents value women’s intellect—was when I came across a pink glitter-decorated girls’ T-shirt on an abstinence website, decorated with the message SEX CAUSES BABIES in a fun font.¹¹ Just in case you weren’t aware.

Some teachings don’t even bother to hide the degree to which *extremely* antiquated notions—like viewing women as property—are being pushed.

Why kNOW, an abstinence-only textbook, outlines this instruction to abstinence teachers: “Tell the class that the Bride price is actually an honor to the bride. It says she is valuable to the groom and he is willing to give something valuable for her.”¹² The same book also notes, “The father gives the bride to the groom because he is the one man who has had the responsibility of protecting her throughout her life. He is now giving his daughter to the only other man who will take over this protective role.”¹³

Another popular notion in abstinence curricula is that women don’t like sex (and if they do, something must be amiss*). Because women aren’t as prone to what these texts describe as “practical enslavement to one’s sexual drive” as men are, it’s the girls’ job to keep the boys at bay.

A workbook from *Sex Respect* states, “Because they generally become aroused less easily, females are in a good position to help young men learn balance in relationships by keeping intimacy in perspective.” Another notes, “Girls need to be aware they may be able to tell when a kiss is leading to something else. The girl may need to put the brakes on first in order to help the boy.”¹⁴ Because, according to the virginity movement, men have no self-control when it comes to anything sexual. Yet another abstinence book claims, “A woman is far more attracted by a man’s personality, while a man is stimulated by sight. A man is usually less discriminating about those to whom he is physically attracted.”¹⁵ And no, these textbooks are *not* from the 1950s.

When women *are* accorded a sex drive, it’s generally attributed to the increased sexualization of pop culture interfering with their natural disdain

* Texts often attribute girls’ “promiscuity” (i.e., having any premarital sex) to low self-esteem, depression, or attention-seeking behavior. It’s never described as a natural or pleasurable urge.

for intercourse: “[A] young man’s natural desire for sex is already strong due to testosterone. . . . Females are becoming culturally conditioned to fantasize about sex as well.”

Making women the sexual gatekeepers and telling men they just can’t help themselves not only drives home the point that women’s sexuality is unnatural, but also sets up a disturbing dynamic in which women are expected to be responsible for men’s sexual behavior.

A passage in *Sex Respect* reads, “A guy who wants to respect girls is distracted by sexy clothes and remembers her for one thing. Is it fair that guys are turned on by their senses and women by their hearts?” Another classroom activity I learned about through SIECUS involved the story of Stephanie and Drew, a couple trying to save sex until marriage. Stephanie is too affectionate and wears tight clothing: “Drew likes her a lot, but lately keeping his hands off her has been a real job!” Stephanie has made it clear that she doesn’t want to have sex; “her actions, however, are not matching her words.”¹⁶

Sounds a bit like “no means yes,” “look what she was wearing,” and various other rape-apologist excuses. When abstinence curricula contain information about sexual abuse or assault (though they often don’t), the message is similar: The onus of preventing sexual assault is on girls—not on men.

SIECUS’s “No More Money for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs” project notes that classes portray abstinence as a choice—which, considering the high rates of rape and sexual assault among young people,* it often just isn’t.

* Eighty-five thousand cases of child sexual abuse are *reported* every year.¹⁷

*Federal guidelines for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs associate sexual abstinence with all things virtuous and sexual activity with a life doomed to failure. Not only is this untrue, but it serves to inflict greater harm upon those who have survived coerced sexual behavior. Such messages are likely to cause further feelings of hurt, shame, anger, and embarrassment in these already victimized young people.*¹⁸

In addition to shaming sexual-assault victims, positioning abstinence as women’s domain further promotes the notion that it’s women’s morality that’s on the line when it comes to sex—men just can’t help themselves, so their ethics are safe from criticism.

Other young people suffering under these discriminatory teachings are LGBTQ youth, who are outright ignored or ostracized. Queer sexuality is not discussed at all; in fact, federal guidelines for abstinence-only programs make even mentioning gay sex near impossible.

In 2006, the United States Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families (ACF) created new guidelines for organizations applying for grants to support abstinence-only education programs. These rules mandated that curricula were to define sexual abstinence very specifically, as “voluntarily choosing not to engage in sexual activity until marriage . . . sexual activity refers to any type of genital contact or sexual stimulation between two persons including, but not limited to, sexual intercourse.”¹⁹ Educators were also required to define the term “marriage” as only “a legal union between one man and one woman as a husband and wife,” and the word “spouse” as only “a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.” Since, according to the virginity movement, only married people are “allowed” to have sex, queer students are essentially

taught that sexual intimacy is something they can never experience.*²⁰ For students who may have gay friends or family members, the message is similar: Their loved ones don't exist.

And, of course, for heterosexual teens who are already sexually active, the only information available to them is all false statistics meant to shame them.

Despite its history of fear-based messaging and regressive goals, abstinence education is becoming decidedly more upbeat as of late. Perhaps recognizing that herpes slideshows and threats of cinder blocks to the crotch weren't quite cutting it, abstinence educators are now pumping up the "youth" factor in their presentations.

Bringing in peer educators, hip-hop groups, and comedians has become par for the course in recent years. As has a healthy dose of consumerism—why let MTV have all the fun? Students can buy shirts proclaiming their virginal status with messages like CHASTE GIRL, CHASTE COUTURE, and (my personal favorite) NO TRESPASSING ON THIS PROPERTY, MY FATHER IS WATCHING.²¹ Abstinence Clearinghouse also sells promise rings, posters, bookmarks—anything you can think to slap a purity message on is there for the buying.

Abstinence leaders are joining in on the fun, too. In a continued effort to revamp its scaremonger image into something more mainstream, the annual conference for abstinence educators, organized by the Abstinence Clearinghouse, decided to have annual themes. In 2006, it was a *Wizard of Oz* conference, complete with panel titles like "If I Only Had a Brain: The Effects of Sex on Brain Physiology," "A Horse of a Different Color,"[†] and "Ding, Dong, the

* Unless they want to remain closeted and marry someone of the opposite sex, of course—a popular course of action for some Republican lawmakers these days.

[†] This panel title is for a group of hip-hop dancers. Ahem.

Witch Is Dead! Which Old Witch? (The 'Safe-Sex' Witch)."²² To further avoid being perceived as out of touch with youth culture (because what says "hip" like a movie from 1939?), the 2008 conference hosted a contest called Abstinence Idol: "Performances can include the following, but are not limited to: singing, drama, oratory, pantomime."²³ And who among us can deny the draw of chastity-based pantomime?

But whether it's by using comedians or Velcro gloves, retro textbooks or ruby slippers, these programs are working hard, and not just to get teens to hold off on sex until marriage. Abstinence-only education seeks to create a world where everyone is straight, women are relegated to the home, the only appropriate family is a nuclear one, reproductive choices are negated, and the only sex people have is for procreation.

CHASTITY CASH

Though controversy over abstinence-only education, as well as criticism thereof, are fairly recent—the Bush administration's sex-education policies made it quite a popular subject—this kind of "teaching" has been alive, kicking, and well endowed for over twenty years.

Abstinence-only education programs have received more than \$1.3 billion dollars since 1996; they're currently slated to receive \$176 million in federal funding in 2008.²⁴ But abstinence education was really born in 1981, thanks to the passage of the Adolescent Family Life (AFL) Act under the Reagan administration.[†] The AFL authorized the funding of pregnancy

* For this reason alone, I tried my darnedest to gain admission to the 2008 conference. Alas, security was tight, and they weren't letting in any known anti-abstinence education writers.

[†] It was widely referred to as the Chastity Act, just in case there was any question about its purpose.

prevention programs, but only those that offered abstinence as the only appropriate course of action—no money was to be given to programs that “encouraged” abortion.²⁵

Because the AFL’s programs often advocated specific religious values, the American Civil Liberties Union filed suit in 1983, claiming that the programs violated the separation of church and state. After a decade-long court battle, a 1993 settlement forbade AFL-funded programs to include religious references and required the information they dispensed to be medically accurate, among other stipulations.

The virginity movement’s next win happened in 1996, when a provision attached to the welfare-reform act allotted \$50 million a year for five years for abstinence-only programs. (The states that choose to accept those funds are required to match every four federal dollars with three state dollars.)²⁶

The programs that use these funds must follow an eight-point definition (often called the A-H guidelines) of what appropriate abstinence education is. The requirements include program participants’ teaching students that “sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects,” and that “bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society.”²⁷

In addition to its endorsement by the AFL and its funds earmarked through welfare reform,²⁸ abstinence-only education receives funding from the Community-Based Abstinence Education Program (CBAE), created in 2001 by conservatives in the House of Representatives. CBAE is controlled by the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families and is the strictest—and perhaps most damaging—form of abstinence funding: Under it, grants often go to private, faith-based organizations like crisis pregnancy centers. Grantees *must* teach all eight points of the abstinence A-H guidelines,

must target children ages twelve to eighteen, and absolutely cannot provide students with any positive information about contraception. Naturally, the virginity movement is a big fan of CBAE subsidies; since the program’s inception in 2001, funding has increased by 465 percent and reached a whopping \$113 million in 2007.²⁹

THE PLAYERS

So who are these elusive leaders of the virginity movement? The major players are the Abstinence Clearinghouse and the National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA). They’re the leading lobbyists, organizations, and providers of “educational” material in the United States. And while proponents of abstinence education run the gamut from legislators to community leaders, it’s large organizations like these, and their powerful ties to conservative Christian think tanks (and more), that make them so very influential.

The National Advisory Council for the Abstinence Clearinghouse, for example, includes members from Focus on the Family, the Heritage Foundation, and numerous crisis pregnancy centers. The organization, which receives more than half a million dollars a year in government grants and contracts, also has a strictly anti-choice medical abstinence board, which must “not only support abstinence-only-until-marriage programs” but also not “counsel, prescribe, or distribute condoms or contraceptives to youth.”³⁰ (In addition to its connection to the abstinence movement, the organization has ties to campaigns that aim to limit access to the HPV vaccine and contraception.)

Perhaps the most important aspect about the Clearinghouse is that Leslee Unruh, arguably the most well-known leader of the abstinence and anti-choice movements, heads it. Unruh, who gained national attention in 2006 when she was campaigning in South Dakota for a ban on abortion (even

in cases of rape and incest), frequently makes the rounds on radio and cable television, touting abstinence-only education and deriding abortion, birth control, and premarital sex. Her debating style is quite . . . original. A 2007 Fox News segment featured Unruh and Mary Alice Carr, of NARAL Pro-Choice New York, debating over a new oral contraceptive called Lybrel. After arguing that the birth control pill was poison and that women needed to be protected from it, Unruh ended the segment by shouting over Carr, “I want more babies. More babies! We love babies!”³¹

Unruh loves babies so much, in fact, that she founded an organization called the Alpha Center, which aims to convince women not to have abortions. In 1987, the Alpha Center pled no contest to five misdemeanor charges of unlicensed adoption and foster care practices. (Nineteen charges, including four felonies, were dropped.) Tim Wilka, the state’s attorney in Minnehaha County, South Dakota, at the time, told the *Argus Leader*, “There were so many allegations about improper adoptions being made [against Unruh] and how teenage girls were being pressured to give up their children. . . . Gov. George Mickelson called me and asked me to take the case.”³² Apparently, Unruh had been promising pregnant teens money to stay pregnant so she could later put their children up for adoption.

The NAEA doesn’t have a much better record. In 2007, the organization, whose board comprises a virtual who’s who of abstinence education, hired the public relations firm Creative Response Concepts—known for the 2004 Swift Boat Veterans ads slamming John Kerry—to spearhead a PR campaign for abstinence-only education policies. In 2006, NAEA executive director Valerie Huber, the head of Ohio’s abstinence programs, was suspended after a state ethics investigation found her guilty of neglect of duty for hiring a company she was affiliated with to do state work.³³

Another abstinence organization, Heritage Community Services (which runs after-school abstinence programs and training workshops for teachers and sells abstinence-only curricula), receives a staggering \$3 million a year in government contributions and grants. Like the Clearinghouse and the NAEA, Heritage’s leadership is wrought with ethical red flags. The women’s legal-rights organization Legal Momentum* reports that the Heritage curriculum is produced and sold by Badgley Enterprises, a for-profit company run by Heritage founder and CEO Anne Badgley and her husband.

*Heritage Community Services purchases its Heritage Keepers textbooks from Badgley Enterprises. Public records show that Badgley Enterprises earned \$174,201 from the sale of its textbooks to Heritage in 2004, and that Badgley herself earned \$51,000 as a writer for Badgley Enterprises. Additionally, Badgley’s husband, daughter, and son-in-law are all paid Heritage employees. Accusations have also been made that Badgley Enterprises was used as a personal account for various members of the Badgley family.*³⁴

In addition, it came out that the organization had paid \$11,000 in 2002 to send two South Carolina state employees to an abstinence conference in California. Badgley defended the decision by calling the trip “inexpensive.”³⁵

These organizations and leaders have strong ties to the anti-choice movement and conservative Christian groups. They have no place in public schools, yet the power they wield over American youth, even in our public schools, is a little more than unnerving.

* Where I had my first job out of grad school (in the interest of full disclosure).

This abstinence-only world is a far cry from reality (residing somewhere in Oz, perhaps?), and not even close to what people want for themselves and their children. According to a study published in *Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 82 percent of Americans support programs that teach contraception as well as abstinence, and half of all Americans oppose abstinence-only education altogether. Even among those who describe themselves as conservatives, 70 percent support comprehensive sex education.³⁶

Some parents—those who aren't about to sit back and watch their kids get taught that condoms don't work and sex is dirty—are fighting back. The wonderful documentary *Abstinence Comes to Albuquerque* follows the story of a New Mexico mom, Susan Rodriguez, who was outraged when she found out that a faith-based private organization—funded by federal dollars—was teaching her daughter about sex.^{*37} Rodriguez went to the Albuquerque school board in 2005 and started complaining, and more and more people in the community took notice. Community members, local politicians, and lawmakers made enough of a fuss that, after a yearlong fight, the state stopped funding these programs in middle and high schools.

One mother, Kristin Phillips, told me in an email that her daughter came home complaining about an STD assembly she was required to attend when she was a sophomore at a Missouri high school.

“The woman leading the assembly told them calculated untruths and

* Another thing that really struck me while watching this film was how an organization composed of mostly white, Christian women was deciding what young women of color—many of them poor—would learn about appropriate sexual behavior and what constitutes a family. Many children in New Mexico come from single-parent homes (bad!); some of them may have parents who aren't straight (sin!).

misleading statements about how condoms have very high failure rates, and [said] there was no reason to get the HPV vaccine,” Phillips wrote.

Phillips discovered the program violated state law, which required sex ed teachers to provide medically accurate information and contraceptive options, and that parents be notified about and informed of the content of any sex ed programs their children would be attending.

“I was directed to the school nurse who was in charge of setting up this program every year,” Phillips continued. “I told her I was concerned about the things the students had been told, and that I had a problem with [their] being given false information about contraception and the HPV vaccine. I pointed out that the district was in violation of the state law, but she said that was ‘my interpretation.’”

Rodriguez and Phillips are not the only parents fighting back—thank goodness. The Internet—teens' public forum of choice—makes calling out misinformation easier, especially for young people. One student, wary of an abstinence lecture at his high school in Spencer, Iowa, filmed the presentation with his cell phone and posted it on YouTube. In addition to telling run-of-the-mill lies about contraception and STIs to the adolescent audience, the lecturer claimed, “The base of most of the lipstick sold in our stores comes from aborted babies.”^{*38} The video made the rounds on political blogs, exposing abstinence programs' outrageousness even further.

On Facebook, users have created over 150 groups dedicated to shining a light on how dangerous and illogical abstinence-only education is, including popular groups like Abolish Abstinence-Only Education—which has nearly one hundred thousand members and posts action items, news alerts, and

* Apparently, the virginity movement is not just concerned with the high rates of teen sex—it's combating the evils of Bonne Bell Lip Smackers as well!

informational-website links—and the more irreverent “Abstinence only sex education is just like hold it potty training.”

Political and feminist blogs have taken abstinence-only education to task time and time again, whether it’s RH Reality Check calling out corrupt abstinence leadership or Feministing.com covering the legislative angles while mocking the bad T-shirts.³⁹

Abstinence-only programs have also been criticized by organizations ranging from the Society of Adolescent Medicine—which called the abstinence curricula “ethically problematic” and a threat to “fundamental human rights to health, information, and life”—to the American Psychological Association.⁴⁰ But despite all of the political, organizational, and community outrage over abstinence-only education, the programs continue to be funded—heavily.

THE END OF ABSTINENCE?

Thankfully, there does seem to be a light at the end of the abstinence-only tunnel. In addition to concerned parents, teens, and progressive organizations, state governments and school boards are catching on. To date, almost half of the fifty states have refused federal abstinence dollars, namely because of the way those subsidies limit schools’ ability to talk about contraception—and all the evidence indicates that more states will join them.⁴¹

But that doesn’t mean abstinence proponents are going anywhere—far from it. In early 2008, the NAEA launched a \$1 million campaign called Parents for Truth, the goal of which is to enlist one million parents to support abstinence-only education by lobbying school boards and lawmakers.⁴² The organization timed the campaign to coincide with Congress’s debate over whether to authorize approximately \$190 million in federal abstinence funds.

Not surprisingly, there’s not much truth telling going on in this campaign—its website’s headlining video reports that comprehensive sex education tells children it’s okay to take showers with each other and instructs them on how to give partners orgasms.

James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth, an organization that helps young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health, calls this characterization of comprehensive sex education “absolutely misleading.” In an interview *The Washington Post*, Wagoner noted that Parents for Truth is “a classic fear and smear campaign.”⁴³ Par for the course for abstinence proponents, of course, and for the virginity movement as a whole.

No matter how successful abstinence leaders might be, and whether they continue to receive funding or not, Americans are nonetheless going to have to deal with cleaning up the mess that abstinence-only education leaves in its wake. After all, we can’t teach false statistics and medically inaccurate information for twenty years and expect that a generation of young people will be just fine.

A 2007 study Congress ordered found that middle school students who had received abstinence-only education were just as likely to have sex as teenagers as those who had not. The same report showed that the teens who had taken abstinence classes were more likely to say that condoms were ineffective in protecting people against STIs—over 20 percent said that condoms can never protect against HIV.⁴⁴ So if students who take abstinence classes are just as likely to have sex as their peers, but have less information about how to protect themselves from pregnancy and STIs—or, worse, believe they cannot prevent pregnancy and STIs at all—that leaves them completely unprotected.

It makes sense, then, that a 2005 report showed that teenagers who took abstinence-only education classes and pledged their virginity were not only less likely to use condoms, but also more likely to engage in oral and anal sex.⁴⁵

Clearly, this isn't what we want for young people. What these students are proving is that the shaming and scaring isn't working. Less information isn't helping—it's hurting.

I'm not going to reinforce the "they're going to do it anyway"* argument. I believe it's time to take a stance on sex education that isn't so passive—young people deserve accurate and comprehensive sex education not just because they're going to have sex, but because *there's nothing wrong with having sex*. Allowing educators to equate sexuality with shame and disease is not the way to go; we are doing our children a great disservice. Not only are we lying to them, we're also robbing them of the joy that a healthy sex life (as a teenager or in adulthood) can provide.

Young people deserve to be equipped to make well-informed decisions for themselves. Enough with teaching young women that they're somehow "ruined" if they become sexually active. Enough with telling students that sexuality is shameful. Enough. I'm reminded of the title of the Abstinence Clearinghouse's 2007 annual conference: "Abstinence Is a Black & White Issue: Purity vs. Promiscuity." That's what we're fighting against—it's time we inserted some nuance and empathy into this national disaster we call sex education.

* Which, of course, they will.