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**HUMAN MATTERS: True fidelity goes beyond keeping sex within marriage**

At the heart of marriage is the covenant pledge of fidelity.

Now, ask around, and you'll find that, when most folks hear the word "fidelity," they immediately think of conjugal faithfulness. That is, I promise never to have sex with anybody else, ever. (Side note: It's almost always a bad sign if, a few years into a marriage, your mate asks for your definition of what technically constitutes "having sex.")

Beyond actual sex, most couples also put the kibosh on kissing, nuzzling, lap dances, skinny-dipping, massaging, showering, dating, vacationing, strip poker, lurid banter, breast exams, getting one hotel room to "save money," erotic e-mails/text messages, midnight IMing, MySpace preoccupations and exchanging lingerie for Christmas.

Understandable. No argument from me. You want a thriving marriage? I'd avoid the above list of activities, unless your partner in those activities is your mate. In which case I'm a big fan of the list..

But, how and when did we decide to automatically associate fidelity with sexuality, and that alone? I think the answer is because that definition is, well, easier. It gets us off the hook.

Let's make it harder. Let's recover a deeper definition of fidelity. One that will involve ever-so-much more intention, rigor and commitment: Marital fidelity is the promise of "Radical Presence." Every day. For the rest of your life.

I promise to be Radically Present. I promise to show up for this relationship, chiefly by promising to show up for my own life. I promise that my "I" will be forever grounded in our "We." I will cultivate habits that nurture our connection. I will be alert to notice habits that presume upon our connection. Take it for granted. While, on any given day, any number of things might rightly and urgently require my energy and attention, I promise not to allow anything to comprehensively subordinate the primacy of Us.

Told you I was gonna make it harder. Now you'll never again be able to hide behind the lame "I know I'm a faithful mate and a good husband/wife because I've never had sex with anyone else."

Now you have to repent from Vocational Infidelity -- chronically subordinating your marriage to your work. It's not OK to tell your mate, "I'll hook up with you when I retire, baby." That's wrong. That's an infidelity. You might make a lot of money, but you'll likely be spending it alone. Or on divorce attorneys.

Give me a nickel for every time I've heard a wife complain about her husband's mistress, whose name is "Work," and you and I will go to Maui and retire.

Now you have to repent from Parental Infidelity -- chronically subordinating your marriage to your role as mother or father. It's not OK to tell your mate, "I'll hook up with you when the last kid is 18, sweetie." That's wrong. That's an infidelity. Your kids might get a lot of your attention, but they'll never learn how to honor the primacy of a quality love relationship. And they'll likely have to be making *two* stops for Thanksgiving and Christmas with the grandkids.

Give me a nickel for every time I've heard a husband complain about his wife's paramour, whose name is "The Kids," and you and I will buy Maui and retire.

Over-fascination with video games, television and cyberspace chat rooms. Abandoning care for your health and vitality. Hobbies, friends, ice cream and Doritos, boredom, underemployment, unwillingness to seek treatment for depression, poor grooming, poor hygiene, overzealous religion/yoga/fishing/you-name-it, addictions, graduate school, unwillingness to set appropriate boundaries with fused, intrusive "family-of-origin" relationships -- all of these things can be infidelities. Each can tempt you to feel entitled to and then habituate being less than Radically Present to your marriage and your mate.

It's wrong to wake up in the middle of a marriage, shrug your shoulders, then passively and unilaterally decide you're no longer interested in sex. That is an egregious infidelity. And it's just plain mean.

When you take the wider view, not having sex with anyone else might be the easiest part of marital fidelity. All you gotta do is keep your pants on. Say "no."

Deeper fidelity means saying "yes," again every day, to being Radically Present to the life of this man or this woman you said you would love, honor and cherish.

A lotta work, you say?

Yep. Great relationships are elitist that way. Only for folks who wanna do the work.

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