

Pledging Virginity



On February 14, 2001 "True Love Waits" is hoping that hundreds of thousands of teenagers will "seize the Net."

"True Love Waits" is an organization that came into being in 1993, and its most visible work has been to encourage young people to make public pledges to remain virgins. So far most of the pledging has taken place in youth rallies. Now the campaign is being taken into cyberspace. The hope is that on Valentine's Day this year, teenagers around the world will log on to the True Love Waits website and fill out a pledge card declaring that they will not have sexual intercourse before marriage. As they do so they will see a counter showing an up-to-the-minute tally of the number of others making their vows too. And logging on on February 15th they will be able to find out just how many in total took up the challenge.

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I must admit to finding this whole initiative quite strange. My first reaction was to feel that it desecrates one of the most personal and meaningful parts of life. Kids are turning abstinence into an open competition. And it's a big competition at that: since 1993 about three million of them have received certificates to say they are virgins and proud of it. I suppose that when I was a teen there were locker room brag sessions about which guys were "getting it" and which girls were "easy," but I doubt the "scorers" would have gone public about it. I certainly wouldn't have gotten up in a testimony meeting to declare that I was still celibate!

The fact is that the world has changed dramatically in a generation. For teens today their whole world is highly sexualized. This point was driven home to me not only by the news of the True Love Waits campaign, but also by the story of Jenna Franklin of Warsop Vale in northern England. Jenna is 15 and can hardly wait until August, when she turns 16, because then she'll legally be able to have the breast enlargement surgery that she's been thinking about since she was 12. "I just want to be happy with my body," she told reporters, "and I think having my breasts enlarged will give me more self-confidence." Pointing to Pamela Anderson as an example, Jenna added, "You have got to have breasts to be successful. Every other person you see on TV has had implants." (The kicker in this story is that Mom is going to pay for the surgery as a birthday present.)

Given this backdrop, maybe public virginity pledges aren't so bizarre after all. If Jenna Franklin thinks it's cool to have big breasts, maybe it's important that somebody else out there thinks it's cool to preserve ultimate intimacy for marriage.

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And now the evidence is coming in that it's not just a matter of "cool." According to the results of research published in the January issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*, virginity pledges actually work. Professors Peter Bearman of Columbia and Hannah Brückner of Yale, authors of the study, say, "Pledging decreases the risk of intercourse substantially and independently." Half the teens in America have had sex by age 15; on average, those who took virginity vows held off for an additional 18 months.

If pledging abstinence is coupled with other factors such as high self-esteem, involvement in a religious community, or living in a two-parent home, the Bearman and Brückner research indicates that sexual initiation will likely be delayed even longer. But even without those factors, their study finds that the apparently simple act of *saying* you'll wait means you'll *actually* wait.

As an ethicist I might wish that young people would have higher motives. I might hope that they would want to keep sex for marriage because it's the right thing to do. Because for all concerned it's the healthiest, safest sex. Because sexual exclusivity is a unique token of one's love for one's wife or husband. Because the ability to be faithful in sex is connected with the ability to be faithful in other areas of our lives. Because...

But that's not the way life works. One of the awkward realities for an ethics professor to admit is that ethical motivation is a developmental thing. It is as people mature that their reasons become more principled. People who are not just older but also more grown up think in terms not only of self-interest, but of the impact on others. Then they are motivated not only by threats of punishment but by a sense of what is just, not only by the approval of peers but by respect for themselves and all people.

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The emergence of these motivations is a big part of what “maturity” means. To expect them of teens is often unrealistic. So when a group like “True Love Waits” can find ways to connect with teenagers, appealing to motivations they understand, and so move them to do something that is morally better than they would do otherwise, I have learned to say bravo!

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