

JUST FRIENDS

Review of *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our Lives* by Catherine M. Wallace

J. Budziszewski

First Things 87 (1998)

For Fidelity is written for baby boomers who got married without knowing what they were doing and are now trying to explain the matrimonial ideal to their kids -- kids who are, predictably, even more antinomian than they are. As a defense of marital faithfulness, the book is pretty thin gruel. On the other hand it clearly answers an fascinating question you might not have thought of asking: What can still be said for faithfulness if you part from all the ancient wisdom but can't quite bring yourself to part from the sexual revolution? From this point of view, the interesting thing about Catherine Wallace's book is not that her argument is thin, but that it can be made at all.

Mrs. Wallace is so ambivalent about her own premises that great care is needed to see what she rejects, what she embraces, and what she means by fidelity itself; one must simply wait to see where the pendulum comes to rest. For example, she calls herself a Christian, tells traditional stories, and employs logical reasoning, yet in the end she rejects not only revelation and tradition, but reasoning itself. New Testament sexual teachings are nothing but "dirt and greed"; tradition is a "hierarchal structure of repression, exclusion, and exploitation"; and it's better to "trust our guts" than to think things out, because "fidelity doesn't make any logical sense at all, and were reality commensurate with logic, then matrimony as I imagine it would be entirely illusory." The fact that she has just made a claim about reality by offering a logical argument seems to escape her.

What she does embrace is more startling still, because it includes everything that makes fidelity seem unreasonable: Passion as holy, self as body alone, desire as need. For the first, she quotes approvingly from John Keats, who was "certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination." For the second, though she admits that the proposition "I am a body" doesn't "work ... all the time for everyone," nevertheless she insists on its truth; "all energy is bodily," and nothing that cannot be explained in bodily terms is true. Weirdest of the three is her view that intimacy requires "the acknowledgement of one another's needs at face value, without question. Your needs are no longer merely yours but as nearly my own as possible. If you say you need something, I need for you to have it -- without second-guessing, without cautious, evaluative skepticism."

The examples she gives are relatively innocuous -- she knows one couple in which the husband has a "need" to climb rocks, and another in which the wife has a "need" to make arrangements of them. But what happens when one spouse claims to "need" something degrading, immoral, or contrary to the "needs" of the other? If Mr. Wallace said he "needed" a little on the side, would Mrs. Wallace "need" for him to have it? So far as I can see, the answer would be Yes. The only reason she gives for her amazing view is that a declaration of a need may reflect a deeper need that cannot be declared. No doubt that is true, but it in no way follows that for spouses to give each other whatever they want is always good for either. One of the things spouses most deeply need is to be *accountable* to each other.

Mrs. Wallace's curious definition of fidelity may be put in four phrases: one at a time, of either sex, only while it lasts, no vows needed. Let's take a look at each element.

"One at a time" is the core of the idea, although, as we have just seen, even this element is questionable -- for although Wallacean faithfulness means not having sex with anyone else at the same time, it also requires letting the other partner have whatever he says he needs.

Element two, "of either sex" follows from the author's indifference to the procreative and unitive goods of marriage. One would think that she upheld and connected them: on one page she compares the "new life" that arises from sexual union with the "new growth" that arises from intimate relationships, and on another she declares that the "fullest enactment" of sexual desire takes place when physical and psychological intimacy "are celebrated together in a single life-generating act." But such passages are misleading. "New life," for the author, is a symbol unbacked by substance, because, as she repeatedly maintains, sexual ethics and the facts of fertility have no connection whatsoever. Her idea of sexual intimacy is equally sterile, because, for all her emphasis on it, she has no conception of its *sine qua non*: the *complementarity* of male and female, the fact that their union surpasses all others precisely because they are *different* from each other, not only physically but psychologically. How she can believe "I am a body" yet overlook physical complementarity is especially mysterious. One peculiar result of the blind spot is that she cannot tell the difference between erotic union and ordinary friendship. Matrimony, she says, is "the building block of all human community because it is the paradigm of friendship in general -- differing in degree but not in kind." The more obvious result, of course, is her view that "Homosexuality can be moral or immoral in exactly the same ways and for exactly the same reasons as heterosexuality."

Element three, "only while it lasts," follows from the author's tendency, despite a great deal of talk about fidelity as a "discipline," to view love not as a holy commitment of the will but as one of those holy emotions that make her quote Keats. Once it "breaks down," the marriage is dead and divorce becomes a "blessing." This view will hardly be sustaining to mortal spouses, who often fall in and out of love with each other several times during a lifelong marriage.

Element four, "no vows needed" follows from the same deficiency. "The vow is to the man what the song is to the bird, or the bark to the dog," said Chesterton; "his voice, whereby he is known." Unfortunately, though big on "commitment," Mrs. Wallace is deaf to its native tongue. The closest she comes to speaking of promises is speaking of "witness" to the initiation of commitments. "Legal" witness is important in her view only if the couple are rich or plan children. She does see genuine value in "communal" witness, but only if the couple "already belongs to a community that understands and supports sexual commitment," for example a church. Sadly, "lots of good people have not found such a community," a description, incidentally, which turns out to include herself. From such remarks we learn many interesting things about the author's world: contraception is one hundred percent effective, poor women are not hurt by divorce, and churches are so rare that lots of good people can't find even one. What we don't learn much about from these remarks is fidelity.

And that brings us back to our starting point. Having discarded the ancient wisdom but chained herself to the sexual revolution, what *can* Catherine Wallace say in favor of fidelity? Here we must take a detour into Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of a "practice." Practices are social activities like tournament chess or concert flute. But not every social activity is a practice; to rate the name, an activity must have certain special features. To begin with, a practice is cooperative, complex, and internally coherent. Moreover, certain standards of excellence are part of its very definition -- this is why we say that careless flautists haven't a clue what musical performance is about. In turn, the effort to achieve these standards has three results. First, the participants cultivate their *powers* of achieving excellence. Second, they achieve certain *goods* -- not only those which are "externally," or coincidentally, connected with the practice, but others which are "internally," or intrinsically, connected with it. For tournament chess, the external goods include prestige, money, and status, but the internal goods include analytical skill, strategic imagination, and competitive intensity. Finally, by striving for excellence in the practice the participants not only achieve these goods, but also achieve greater and greater understanding of them.

Although Wallace is trying to follow MacIntyre, her terminology is a little inconsistent, so I will use MacIntyre's terminology instead. With this little help, her argument can be put in a nutshell. (1) Matrimony is a practice. (2) The discipline of fidelity is one of the standards of excellence that define it. (3) Intimacy is one of the goods internal to it. (4) Without fidelity, intimacy is impossible.

So far as it goes, I think all this is precisely correct. In one way, the argument even goes further than necessary. It would have been sufficient to justify statement four -- that without fidelity, intimacy is impossible. The author does not need to roll out MacIntyre just to tell us, as she does, that fidelity is to marriage as yeast is to cinnamon buns. The analogy could be true and helpful even if MacIntyre were wrong. More serious is that in four other ways, the argument does not go far enough.

In the first place, it is a little hard to see why the author refuses to discuss the goods

externally connected with faithful matrimony -- for example the avoidance of disease and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The only reason she gives is that none of these goods offer a "sufficient" account of sexual fidelity. As we are about to see, her argument about intrinsic goods doesn't offer a "sufficient" account either, and in any case, the fact that something is not the whole story hardly means that it is not a part of it. But there is more. Wallace not only declines to speak of the external goods, she scorns those who do. She accuses them of "repression" and "indoctrination" merely because they overlook a different part of the story than she does. I agree with her that it sends the wrong message to warn teens that having babies cuts into earning potential -- that's not pro-chastity, it's pro-sterility. But how is it "repressive" to tell them that sex should wait until they can give their babies a stable home?

In the second place, her understanding of what counts as an internal or external good is distorted because she views her subject in a vacuum. In her view, fidelity is intrinsic to matrimony but stabilizing families is merely a side effect. Why not say instead that fidelity is intrinsic to matrimony but that matrimony is a building block in the yet greater practice of building stable families? Again, she holds that fidelity is intrinsic to matrimony but keeping God's commandments is merely a side effect. Why not say instead that fidelity is intrinsic to matrimony but that matrimony, for those whom God calls to it, is a building block in the yet greater practice of obedience? But obedience is not on her radar screen; it implies "authority," which, with "tradition," she says, has been forever discredited by Kent State.

In the third place, she has no real answer to people who just aren't interested in the practice she recommends. She is quite right that real cinnamon rolls are impossible without yeast, that concert flute playing is impossible without practice, and that sexual intimacy is impossible without fidelity. But we don't blame people who are just as pleased by cinnamon biscuits as cinnamon rolls, or who would rather play around at music than train for performance. How then are we to answer people who say that as long as they have a sexual outlet they can do just fine without intimacy? How can we explain to them that they are *wrong*, that they are *not* fine? To do this, it isn't enough to show how matrimony resembles fine baking and virtuoso musicianship. We have to show how it is *different* from fine baking and virtuoso musicianship. Eventually this requires speaking of all those things Mrs. Wallace refuses to speak about, like the commands of God and the purposes He has implanted in human nature.

She tries. Though she refuses to speak of the need for obedience, she does speak of the need for transcendence. *To be blessed*, she says, is "to belong to the Holy, to participate in the Sacred," and in sexual relationships, blessedness just doesn't happen without intimacy. The problem is that when push comes to shove, the author doesn't believe this herself. What she really thinks comes out not in her disquisitions on "the idea of the Holy" and the meaning of the Hebrew stem *brk*, but in the story of her first kiss. She was only sixteen, and "it was glorious my very first glimpse of the erotic dimension of the life energy that is blessing." I'm glad she enjoyed it. But attend: She barely knew the guy and he never called her again. There was no intimacy; the experience was "hormones, pure and primal." If "blessing" can be had on the quick, why bother with fidelity? Romanticism is a slippery slope. If Mrs.

Wallace wishes to agree with Keats that passions are holy in themselves, then ultimately she must agree with Shelley that monogamy is bunk.

The final purpose of the book is to teach how to explain fidelity to our children. Here not much need be said, because again the author is working at cross-purposes with herself. Her first main idea is that sexual desire is but one of many desires that kids have to understand -- from which she draws the practical suggestion that children should be encouraged to reason about sexual desire by analogy with the desires they understand already. The problem here is that she has insisted repeatedly that sexual desire is *different* from other desires because "it cannot be fully satisfied by the solitary individual." This makes analogical reasoning a snare.

Her second main idea is that the best way to teach anything is through stories -- from which she draws another practical suggestion, that kids should be told stories not only about honorable behavior but also about appetites themselves. So far so good, but when she gets down to specifics the argument passes over from the meager to the bizarre. What stories about appetites does she suggest? Every one of them turns out to be about gluttony, excess, or indiscipline: the time her great-aunt made too many donuts and she "solved the problem" by eating them all, the "first" time someone had too much to drink, and the time she failed her qualifying exams in French. The point of story one seems merely that she was tired of donuts for a while, the point of story two that the drinker didn't learn his lesson (it was the *first* time, remember), and she tells us the point of story three: "the world did not come to an end."

Let us then reason from these stories by analogy. Sexual excess might make you tired of sex for a while, but you'll enjoy telling about it afterward. You probably won't learn your lesson, but the world won't come to an end.

Great, Mom. I'm sure the kids will get the picture.