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Casualties of the Sexual Revolution

by

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The rhythmic chug of the respirator broke the silence as I shone a light in Ellen's eyes in the Intensive Care Unit. I recalled the first time I had examined those eyes seventeen years before in the Newborn Nursery. Those once clear and lustrous blue eyes now were clouded by an overdose of barbiturates. Ellen had been brought to the Emergency Room by her tearful parents. I remembered those same parents over a period of years, bringing her to my office, crisp and clean, for routine examinations or for some minor illness that quickly captured their concern.

They recounted what had now become a familiar story. She had "gone steady" for two years. Despite being on the "pill" since shortly after puberty, she had become pregnant once and had an abortion a year ago. Now her boyfriend had lost interest and was going away to a college on the West coast. She had been jilted, humiliated, and cast aside by someone who now considered her demonstrative emotions to be an embarrassment and a bore. She would survive to become a near-casualty of the "sexual revolution."

The "modern sexual revolution" is neither "modern" nor a revolution. It is difficult to find any human folly more ancient than the desire to have sex without rules. Many biblical scholars, in fact, believe that the symbolism used in the story of Adam and Eve would indicate that mankind's *first* transgression was against acceptable sexual conduct.

It would be more appropriate to call the present change a "regression" rather than a "revolution." We like to think of ourselves as living in an age of sexual enlightenment. Yet, it seems that our highly vaunted sexual freedom has turned out to be a regression to a new form of Puritanism. Defining Puritanism, as Rollo May has done, as a state of alienation from the body and a separation of emotion from reason, we can see these elements of Puritanism in the new sexuality. The error of the old

Puritanism was a desire to have love without falling into sex. The error of the New Puritanism is a desire to have sex without falling into love.

Many young people would like to romanticize about "serial monogamy" but their choices are really the same as they were for their Victorian forbears. These choices are still very limited. Either they can choose genital activity without commitment, or they can choose sexual abstinence. For years, men (or at least the male chauvinist minority) have been trying to create a myth of "commitment" without marriage. This myth was essential in the service of the Machismo. The "chase mentality" is a necessary ingredient in heterosexual relationships for adolescents of all ages. In this mentality, the male is the hunter and the female is the hunted. In pursuit of the conquest, he makes many pseudocommitments to trap his unwary quarry. It may take flattery; it may take his frequent presence; it may take the magic phrase "I love you."

When the fox is caught, however, the chase is over. Sexual intimacy becomes an end and not a beginning. For the wily hunter, however, no prize is worth his life. If he must promise marriage for a lifetime, he will hunt other game in other seasons.

Women over the centuries have easily evaded this kind of pursuit. They have sensed that they have much more at stake in the realm of sexual gamesmanship. As the poet said, "Love to man is a thing apart; 'tis woman's whole existence." It would be hazardous to blur over differences in the name of unisex. The woman may invest her entire self in a situation which for the man is merely pleasure-oriented. Most campus polls indicate that, when intercourse occurs, the female partner expects ultimate marriage 80 percent of the time, while the male partner looks forward to marriage only about 10 percent of the time. Nature, which has equipped women with a more complex reproductive system and a more comprehensive emotional response to mating, has also equipped her with the intuition to look beyond orgasm to the deeper mysterious significance of sexual activity.

In recent years, however, women have turned away from these intuitions to seek a different role. Strangely enough, they have done so under the rubric of "emancipation." She who was once his superior in this most intimate area has demanded to become his equal, and in doing so, has relinquished many of her most cherished advantages.

The legacy of this rejection has been predictable and mostly tragic. A wise man has said "God always forgives, men sometimes forgive, nature never forgives." One cannot safely cast aside behavioral patterns which have evolved over centuries without questioning where the old standards came from or why they survived so long. The new cynicism says that certain types of conduct were forbidden by a less open, more dishonest generation which was too hypocritical and "uptight" to espouse in public

what they did in private. No homage was paid to the Author of Human Nature who had shown to innumerable generations that what was forbidden was that which was most likely to cause dislocation and unhappiness.

One can look at the societal consequences of the "new morality" and begin to appreciate nature's capacity to retaliate. There is a pandemic of venereal disease, for example; a great upsurge in illegitimacy and abortion, an all-pervading sense of alienation among young people with an alarming increase in adolescent suicide. These broad calamities, however, are made up of innumerable small personal tragedies which we would do well to examine in order to try to understand.

There is a highly vocal minority which urges the acceptance of a pattern of casual sexual activity. In the forefront of this lobby are the social engineers of the population movement for whom all sexual activity is "responsible" as long as it is contraceptively controlled. It is fair to say that exaggerated concern about the population explosion has led to the copulation explosion. The soft-core pornographic press has succeeded also in making the playboy and playgirl very chic and "with it." There has been a simultaneous paralysis of opinion makers at all levels of the school system who have failed in their responsibility to develop a countercurrent against the sociological and commercial exploitation of promiscuity.

This has created a moral vacuum which cruelly betrays the young people who are looking for guidance and reinforcement for their deeply felt personal principles. A girl used to feel guilty if she went to bed with a boy; now she is told to feel guilty if, after a few dates, she refrains from going to bed with him. What this means, of course, is that young people must learn to perform sexually but at the same time not to let themselves go in unseemly commitment. No casual coitus-centered affair, however, can be anything but fraudulent for a woman. The main pressures on adolescent males are toward achievement, while the girl's principal pressures are social. His most urgent pressures may be relieved when she "gives in" but her pressures are compounded. She must worry about extramarital pregnancy, the foreboding complications of contraceptive drugs, the cruel consequences of the double standard of acceptable behavior. Worse yet, she may feel trapped in a relationship with no future with a man she does not really trust and whose needs begin and end with activities which do not deeply involve her as a person.

Beneath this facade of obsession with sex and idolatry toward the human body, however, is a great reservoir of fear. Modern man mechanizes his body because he is afraid of it, afraid of his procreative powers, afraid of his deep roots in nature, afraid of his strategic continuity with past and future generations. Surely something much more profound and mystical is

going on in sex than one would find in the voyeurism and sadomasochism which is so tirelessly repeated in modern books and television. It is this powerful mystical element which frightens young people. It is this element which remains impalpable and intangible through countless casual liaisons. It is this element which will constantly elude those who are merely "faithful for the moment." It is this element that probably accounts for results of the Redbook survey of 100,000 women which concluded "with notable consistency, the greater the intensity of a woman's religious convictions, the likelier she is to be satisfied with the sexual pleasures of marriage."

We will never understand this generation, self-liberated as they are, without examining the generation which preceded it. None of the old generation gap clichés will do. The previous generation did not ignore sex. Was there ever a group more verbal or more conscious of sex than the military into which so many of today's fathers were abruptly thrust? Sex information and misinformation have abounded in all generations. There was certainly less formal classroom sex education. This meant that one learned faulty sexual attitudes from the girls at the office or from a hash marked sergeant rather than from a so-called authoritative source. No one can examine the consequences of formal sex education as currently promulgated without being convinced that it has been a negative rather than a positive influence. One can fault the present generation of parents for lack of openness without necessarily accusing them of prudishness. If one agrees that parents teach more by example than by precept, then we can fairly accuse parents of being less than open about affirming the broad procreative implications of sex in a stable family environment.

Parents have a highly meaningful role to play in making the important distinction between sex and love. When one listens to the lyrics of modern music and hears "love" used constantly and repetitiously as a synonym for intercourse or its preliminaries, he becomes convinced of the importance of this distinction. How many young people really feel they are serving the deified principle of "love" only to be burned on the altar of physical passion? Parents are not only the best teachers in this area, they are probably the only teachers. Their life together makes them exemplars of the distinction between *love* as the selfless, outer-directed desire for another person's happiness and *sex* as the often painfully strong inner-directed desire for personal gratification. They are the models for sex in the context of continuity, sex linked with procreation, sex as the ultimate intimacy rather than as a substitute for intimacy.

In the subculture of casual sex, real intimacy is unattainable. Sex becomes something we do when we run out of conversation. When the partners have not matured to a point where they are interesting to one

another as persons, conversation runs out quickly. It is a strange paradox in our society that what goes into building a relationship – sharing of dreams, blending of tastes, hopes for the future, fears for the past – seems to make people more shy and vulnerable than going to bed with each other. We are more frightened by the tenderness that goes with baring our souls than of the physical nakedness of sexual intimacy. Thus, inevitably, promiscuity is a lonely and alienating journey with signposts of boredom, shame, heartbreak, and self-doubt.

Anyone with an historical sense and a traditional perspective will know that the “sexual revolution” is really a fad. It cannot survive because it rebukes history and ignores the fundamental features of human nature – both male and female. It aims at exploitation and neurotic compensation and avoids real love and depth of understanding. Its counterfeit currency has no real future as the basis for interpersonal relations. We cannot afford the luxury of allowing its gradual attrition through disenchantment. The revolution should end abruptly in an armistice which introduces a new era which stresses the positive value of chastity.
