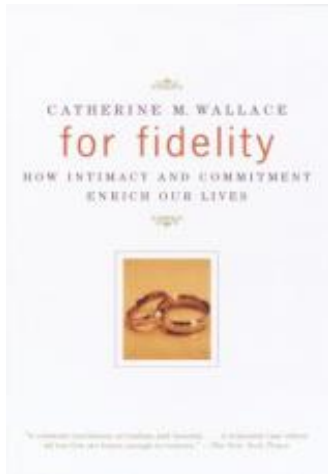


# For Fidelity

by Catherine M. Wallace

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## About the Book

**For Fidelity** will interest a wide variety of readers because Wallace combines scholarly insight with the practical wisdom of a battle-scarred parent of teenagers. Parents who must contend with the skepticism and the probing questions of adolescents and pre-adolescents will find strong, historically grounded arguments explaining that both the psychology of sex and the psychology of intimacy reveal the importance of commitment and the hazards of casual promiscuity. Parents of younger children will see how the ordinary social lives of children and ordinary familial story-telling provide ample opportunity to teach the basic interpersonal integrity that underlies sexual honesty. Anyone interested in the grounds on which one might intelligently defend sexual commitment in our day will find a witty, engaging, sophisticated argument that synthesizes both contemporary psychology and ancient spiritual traditions to offer a convincing paradigm shift in our thinking about sexual ethics: Wallace sees sexual fidelity not as a form of property rights but rather as the embodied expression of personal integrity. Readers of any sort will enjoy a writer whom **The New Yorker** called "eloquent" and **The Hungry Mind Review** praised as "that rare creature among writers, someone both witty and wise."

## Discussion Guide

1. Chapter One (pp. 3-24) provides an overview of the quandaries besetting any consideration of sexual behavior. When should parents start to talk with their children about sexuality? Is "just say no" an effective practical response to adolescent sexuality? Is it morally and intellectually sufficient? Can-or should-parents assert absolute authority over their children's sexual behavior? Has religious faith or spiritual belief played a role in your thinking about these issues? How or why or why not?
2. Do parents today face questions about sexuality in a sharply different cultural climate than parents of earlier generations? Do you think that many parents have different, more skeptical or more critical attitudes towards "the sexual revolution" than they had as teens and young adults themselves? Why do you think these attitudes have changed? What

should parents do if they feel that they made some mistakes in their own sexual choices over the years? Should they talk honestly to their teenagers about what experience has taught them?

**3.** What is the difference between sexual fidelity and mere sexual exclusivity? Is there "something more" to marital fidelity than rules about who sleeps or does not sleep with whom? As you look at your own experience and at the lives around you, to what extent do successful marriages look like a set of carefully negotiated rights and obligations, and to what extent do they resemble a creative process?

**4.** What does it mean that sexual fidelity is intrinsic to marriage? Can people have both a long happy marriage and multiple sexual partners? To what extent is a happy marriage a matter of good luck and to what extent does it depend upon serious, sustained effort on by both partners?

**5.** Chapter Two (pp. 25-55) argues that we have an immediate erotic need for fidelity. What is the difference between "I am a body" and "I have a body" sorts of experiences? Have you ever had experiences of one kind or the other? Do you agree that both claims or both kinds of experiences are true, each in their own ways? What cultural traditions or inherited attitudes and opinions have influenced your thinking in these regards? When has that influence been helpful, and when has it been detrimental?

**6.** What is the difference between mind-over-body self-control and wholistic integration? Can you have one without the other? Should you have one without the other? Can sexual morality be grounded in psychological integration or whole-heartedness rather than in strict sexual self-control? Why--or why not? Can sexual morality be grounded both in psychological insights and in religious tradition simultaneously? Why or why not?

**7.** Are hedonism and repression the opposite of one another, or do they both depict sex as "just a physical thing"? Do you agree that marketplace concepts like cost-benefit calculations shape a lot of contemporary thinking and talking about sexual relationships? How does "the dating game" or the "singles scene"--especially as represented in movies and on television--manage to combine the worst aspects of hedonism and repression? Do sex-education programs in your community feed into this marketplace individualism? What alternative traditions or communal resources are available?

**8.** Chapter Three (pp. 56-61) argues that we have a profound psychological need for fidelity. How is sexual desire different from other physical desires and needs? According to this chapter, what's wrong with casual sex between consenting adults? Do you agree with this conclusion? What's wrong with the idea that sex can be a casual expression of friendly affection with a variety of partners before marriage, and then function successfully as the embodied language of commitment after marriage? Do you agree that sexual intercourse "ought to be the exclusive and embodied language of commitment between two people"? Should these prohibitions and moral norms apply with equal seriousness to same-sex relationships? Why or why not?

**9.** How does Wallace define marriage? Is that an adequate definition? What is the difference between seeing marriage as a licensed activity bound by a legal contract and seeing marriage as a sexually embodied friendship bound by a moral commitment? Why do we have licenses and laws pertaining to marriage? Do they help people to understand how marriages work or why they succeed? What is the difference between seeing marriage as a moral commitment and seeing it as happily-ever-after romantic bliss?

**10.** How does the security of a serious and permanent commitment to the relationship facilitate the development of

psychological intimacy? How does the experience of intimacy influence a person's ongoing adult development? In that regard, what is the connection between vulnerability and compassion?

**11.** Take another look at the specific behaviors or virtues underlying successful marriages (pp. 69-85; see also the table of contents, p. x). Are such virtues appropriate only within marriage? Are these virtues familiar to you from religious teaching or other sources of wisdom about interpersonal morality? Do they seem characteristic of the happiest intimate friendships and marriages that you know? Why might it be easier to attain these moral ideals of personal responsibility within an intimate and committed relationship than with other people in general? What role might a community play in supporting or in discouraging these virtuous ideals?

**12.** Chapter Four (pp. 99-132) argues that we have an ultimate spiritual need for fidelity. What are the three layers of meaning shaping the concept of "blessing" in the Bible? How does the concept of blessing undercut our tendency to claim personal credit for our achievements? Why is claiming that kind of personal credit a hazardous proposition no matter what? Does it make sense to you that it can be a blessing to survive catastrophe and suffering with our humanity intact? Is it, for some people, a blessing to get a divorce-or to survive one? How can the concept "blessing" help marriages to survive bad times without breaking up?

**13. Sarah and Abraham:** How is the open-ended, unconditional commitment of fidelity in fact an ambiguous, distinctly hazardous undertaking? Why should we undertake it? **Jacob:** How does sustaining a committed relationship over a long period become a life-defining or identity-defining struggle? Can we let ourselves be influenced by other people without necessarily betraying our own identity? **Mary of Nazareth:** How is fidelity-in our marriages, in our lives generally-a confrontation with or a liberation from consumerist self-absorption and psychological slavery to the rewards and demands of the workplace? **Psalms 1:** How is fidelity a spiritual discipline or practice rather than a product or a state that we either attain or fail to attain?

**14.** Chapter Five (pp. 133-146) describes the ways in which we can help children to develop a capacity for fidelity both in marriage and in all relationships. Why is fidelity important to any real friendship of any kind and at any age? Can you remember times when a friend's kindness or loyalty or support made an important difference in your own life or in the lives of children that you know? Do you think it is likely that someone could attain fidelity in marriage but remain a ruthless, exploitative person in other relationships? What does that suggest about when and how children develop the capacity to sustain faithful, happy marriages?

**15.** How do moral, familial, and religious traditions help to sustain and strengthen children when they are under peer pressure? What's inadequate about letting children think that the difference between right and wrong is an entirely subjective, personal matter grounded in private opinion? How do telling stories and listening to stories help parents to teach their children about the role and importance of the virtues? What stories about moral expectations or moral achievements do you remember hearing as you grew up? How do such stories influence attitudes and behavior?

## Author Bio

A mid-stream Baby Boomer, born in 1950, Catherine M. Wallace earned a doctorate in English from the University of

Michigan in 1977. After a brief career in academia, she became an independent writer. She has spent the last eighteen years working at home, reading and writing and raising her three children, now teenagers. She lives with her husband and children in suburban Chicago. Her other work includes **The Design of 'Biographia Literaria'** (Allen & Unwin, 1983) and **Dance Lessons: Moving to the Rhythm of a Crazy God** (Morehouse, 1999).

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