

Cultural Daily

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Killing My Virgin Myth

Jenn Robbins · Wednesday, June 10th, 2020

I can't remember the first time I wondered how I would tell my daughter that not only was I not a virgin when I got married, but that I was a pregnant bride — and that her daddy was not my “first.” I think she was a baby, and I think I pondered it even then because I wanted to project a “moral” image of a mother she could look up to...one that might inspire her to hold onto her virginity throughout her teenage years into at least her twenties...or maybe even her wedding night. I had received a set of rules — ones that I've come to reject — and that I ultimately had failed to abide by, and I was ashamed. My Virgin Myth was born.

When I was young, my mom and my religion advised me not to have sex until I was married. This seemed like a no brainer until I hit high school, and I wrestled with my hormones until I was 18. I was about to go off to college, and I was feeling pretty grown-up and invincible, and the guy I was dating started pressuring me hard. I knew why. He was trying to bed me before I went away to school, so he'd have some assurance that I wouldn't break up with him once I got to campus. I naively believed he did not have that kind of hold on me and never would. He also had just the right amount of bad-boy-with-a-good-heart thing going that I was hooked. We “did it” a month before my fall semester at college began; then we moved away to our different campuses about an hour and a half apart.

As Freshmen Orientation Week concluded, I remember thinking I had made a big mistake. There were guys everywhere. At dorm parties and frat parties, clubs, BBQs, dances. I couldn't partake in most of these events because my bad-boy-with-a-good-heart boyfriend gave me a curfew that sent me back to my dorm at 10 o'clock every night (cell phones weren't a thing). Every evening, I would stretch the dorm room phone into the hall, and dutifully make my call. Sometimes he'd be in his dorm room to answer and sometimes he wouldn't. Sometimes he'd apologize and sometimes he'd have me in tears. And so, by November, I was in love. Every Friday, unbeknownst to my parents, I drove to his college, and we'd spend the weekend together. I became very invested in the relationship, even though I felt like I'd made a huge mistake. We weren't well suited to each other, and he cheated on me multiple times. I didn't want to break up with him, because I loved him, and besides, if I did that, I would not be married to the first man I slept with. My future husband could be the second, or third, or worse. If I were to maintain any semblance of virtue I had left, he had to be the one. I would make him be the one. I couldn't cut my losses and move on and meet a new guy because I was a one-guy-type-of-girl and I had made my choice, and I had to live with it.

Ironically, the best advice I got at the time regarding my mental and sexual health came from a priest. During confession, I told him I was having sex with my boyfriend and I felt terribly guilty. I told him how alone I was. What a failure I felt like. How alienated from God I had become. He told me I didn't need absolution but asked that I consider what he had to say: “Imagine railroad

tracks leading off into the distance. The Church is on one side of the tracks — maybe your parents, your expectations for yourself are there too. Now imagine yourself walking on the other side of the tracks. Right beside you is Jesus. He is always there, next to you, on your side. You are never alone”. And, wise man that he was, on a campus full of college co-eds, he then asked if I was taking birth control. And I said no – we are using condoms. Then he said, “Here’s what you do: take care of yourself. Keep praying. Get on the pill. Do not tell your boyfriend you are on it. The pill is for you, not him. Use condoms. Protect yourself”.

I wish I had listened to all of it. I did start praying again right away, and after three years with my boyfriend, I begged God to help me out of our unhealthy relationship. Then, at photo day my senior year, I met the love of my life. The admiration, attraction, and desire I felt for him gave me the strength to move on. Just a couple of years later, there I was with my groom, on our honeymoon, looking at my rounded tummy. I vowed I would tell my child that I was a virgin when I got married and that her daddy was my one-and-only so that she would think I was a “virtuous” mom. I made my husband promise not to tell.

My Virgin Myth. It was nearly dispelled one day while I was lost driving in LA, and my baby girl, now 13, took advantage of my discombobulated state. She walked me through the math from my wedding date to her birth. As I poorly navigated her questions and the streets of Westwood, she caught me. My main goal at that point was to convince her of two untruths: a) while I may have gotten pregnant, her dad and I were already engaged, and b) her dad was the only man I had ever slept with. I also told her she better not tell her little sister (or else). Half shocked but mostly pleased with herself, she believed my revised myth of virginal purity and promised not to tell on me to her sister.

It’s 5 years later and I find myself in the car with my younger daughter; I’m lost again, but this time desperately. I had just had another cervical biopsy done. It was invasive and scary. Years before, I had “admitted” to the girls that I’d been diagnosed with human papillomavirus (HPV). I explained that HPV is an extremely common STD that can exist in your body without surfacing, but when it does, it can cause cervical cancer. Mine hadn’t shown up in a test since that first diagnosis, but it was back. Now, riding in the car with me, my younger daughter is 15 years old and fixated on my silence. She knows I had been to the gynecologist that day and asks if I had “some disease” because of too much “gross sex with dad”. I have no idea if I got it from her dad. But now I feel compelled to educate my daughter about prioritizing her sexual health. To help her learn from my mistakes, and to see that this kind of thing can happen to anybody. As of now, the only person she could “blame” for my STD was her dad because of the Virgin Myth I had created. That was not fair to my husband.

“Did Dad give you some gross sex disease?”

(Pause)

“Mom!”

“I’m considering my answer“

“Mom!”

“Fine,” I said, with no lack of drama, “I want to tell you something if you think you really want to know”

She said she did. Once out of the car, we proceeded quietly into the house. While she distracted herself with Instagram and Cheez-its, I proceeded to kill my Virgin Myth. She was pretty much with me until we got to the point about the priest. “Why in the world would you tell a priest about

that? You're so weird." At this point, I realized that there was so much baffling and possibly unwelcome information coming her way; I had to get in and get out as quickly as possible.

"The point is he was trying to get me to protect my sexual health, and I didn't listen. I told my boyfriend I was on the pill because I knew it would make him happy, and we slept together for three years without using condoms. Bad choice."

"Was Dad a virgin?"

"No. So I guess I'll never know who I got it from, for sure."

"Well, I got HPV vaccinated, right?"

"Yes you did, but it doesn't cover all of the strains of HPV. You can't be too careful. Always use a condom. You cannot be too careful. The only way to protect your self is not to have sex, I guess. Or to be a virgin and find yourself another virgin and if you can't wait, get married when you're 18."

Yeah, I actually said that. Do I want her to get married at 18? Hell, no. And I wouldn't want anyone to put the level of judgment on themselves that I did. It can cause you such shame that you withdraw inside yourself and doubt who you are, and your choices, even when you feel good about yourself and your decisions. I've thought things about myself and stayed in situations that I would never want anyone to. People should have full lives, as many relationships as they want, and the experience of sex as something wonderful and free — not "gross" or forbidden. I don't know if I've conveyed this to my daughters, honestly, I hope I have. At least I know that they do talk to me.

When my elder daughter was finishing up high school, she confided in me that she wanted to have sex with her boyfriend. I knew that she loved him very much, but this was a relationship that wouldn't make it to the Fall. Their respective college choices would place them thousands of miles away from each other, and I didn't see the loyalty from him for her that she showed to him, even at a close distance. It was early June, just before High School graduation, and I sat on the edge of her bed, as she told me of her intention. Just when I was struck with worry and that out-of-control feeling you get as a parent with a teenager, I remembered: the railroad tracks. The tracks that were shown to me at her age. I told her I didn't know if he was "the one", but I got that she was in love and felt ready. Of course, this was kind of upsetting to her, but I said it didn't really matter if we agree, because we won't always agree, and that's okay. She may see me or her dad on one side of those tracks, but God is always walking with her. I don't think I told her until later that I saw a train wreck in her future, and envisioned myself, helplessly standing by. I think I just told her I was happy and grateful that I had earned her confidence. We discussed birth control and went to the doctor; and her relationship progressed as planned. When it fell apart later in the summer, it was pretty rough. We were in her bed again and I hugged her and felt her pain, as a woman, and as a mom. What can you do at these moments, but hold them: your girls who are now young women, whom you want to protect, but whose lives are and have always been their own? I don't judge her or anyone. And I try not to judge myself anymore. Without my experiences, I may not have come to realize what it takes to have a full and loving relationship with my children: it means being our true selves, open and curious to each other and our differences, and relentlessly honest. When my Virgin Myth died, a whole lot of truth came out and created a space for more and more. And my God that was a relief to me, and an honest start for all of us.

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