

INTRODUCTION

MARNIE AND DAVID FERREE'S STORY



The great Western novelist Louis L'Amour opens his novel *Lonely on the Mountain* with this line: "There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning." As a writer, when I first read L'Amour's line I thought it was a wonderful way to begin a book. Today, on a much deeper level I understand what those words really mean.

The "finished" state in my life and marriage came in the winter of 1990 when I received the devastating diagnosis of early stage cervical cancer caused by the sexually transmitted disease HPV (human papillomavirus). As I hung up the phone after the doctor's call, my mind raced with images of medical treatments, of figuring out how to care for my young children while I was ill, and especially of telling my husband. I knew that my secret life was about to be exposed.

David and I had married in 1981 (just a few weeks after Princess Diana), and for the first few years we'd been very happy. It was a second marriage for us both, but we'd each married young, neither of us had any children, and we both had divorced after only four years. We viewed our life together as an opportunity to start over after a serious misstep in our youth. David had an excellent position in a Fortune 100 company, and we had more money than we needed to be com-

fortable. Within a few years we were blessed with a beautiful, healthy daughter and son.

But underneath the veneer of tranquil, suburban, upper-middle-class life, I harbored a number of secrets. The darkest one—and the one most pertinent to my health issue—was a secret I'd successfully hidden for almost twenty years. Something I'd denied, rationalized and justified since the age of fourteen. A reality too painful to admit and so unrecognized in women that I'd never heard its name: *I was a sex addict*.

At the time of my cervical cancer diagnosis, I was intensely involved in an extramarital affair. It was only the latest of many similar relationships throughout both my marriages. In fact, my unfaithfulness had been the reason for the end of my first.

It was two more years before I heard that clinical diagnosis of sexual addiction, and even then, it was almost impossible to accept. A sex addict? What a horrible name! Surely that description didn't apply to me. I was a nice, conservative, church-going soccer mom with a college degree and a long list of accomplishments. I had an equally nice husband, though I'd come to quietly resent him over the years.

David worked hard and provided well. He was a kind, gentle man with a methodical head on his shoulders and a calm demeanor. He had a giving spirit and was a good father. He, however, was also unfamiliar with the landscape of intimacy. David was a practical man, not an emotional one. He didn't know how to talk about matters of the heart, and he wasn't able to show his feelings. Though I'd initially been attracted to his stability, I'd come to resent his lack of spontaneity and emotional presence. I viewed him as boring, shut down, and worse. I blamed him for the growing detachment in our marriage and for my growing discontent. I wondered how I'd again married the wrong person, and I believed that if I were married to Mr. Right, my life would be the magical one I'd always dreamed of.

I had little understanding of my own behavior and less understanding of my own story. I was a preacher's daughter who had been raised in the church. Our family looked perfect and was widely respected. I was raised with many advantages and was an excellent,

popular student. Sure, we'd had our share of sorrow. When I was three years old, my mother had died from colon cancer, and my two older brothers and I were left to be raised largely by a grandmotherly helper who came to live in our home.

Our family spiritualized our feelings of grief, and we never talked about our loss. My father, brothers and I soldiered on, each lost in our separate pain. My father buried himself in "God's work" and gave little time to his family, which was the custom for his generation, especially for members of the clergy. As a grown woman with children of my own, I had no idea how deeply I'd been affected by my mother's death and my father's absence.

I had even less understanding of the rest of my story. Like most people, I viewed my situation as normal. Beginning when I was five years old, a dear family friend assumed a fatherly role in my life, and for the next fifteen years he was a central figure in our home. It was a very positive relationship in many ways as he taught me how to roller skate, encouraged me as a fledgling writer, and listened to my hopes and dreams. However, this friend also exposed me to lots of pornography (and himself), and he steadily groomed me as a sexual predator. In gradually escalating sexual activity, he exploited my loneliness, which he filled with fun activities during the day and long talks deep into the night when my father was away. I was ten years old before I realized that some of the things we were doing must be "sex," which, of course, was never discussed in my home. By the time we actually had intercourse when I was fourteen, the only way I could make sense of the sexual relationship was to blame myself.

My friend was gentle and "loving" with me. He spent time with me and was attentive to me. I loved him and sought his company. He said he loved me and that our relationship was special. How could I not be at fault for our sexual activity? I believed I had chosen (as a ten-year-old!) to be sexual with a man fifteen years my senior. Especially by the time I was fourteen and running my family's household, I thought I was old enough to choose to have sex with a man almost old enough to be my father.

And when I kept choosing to have sex as a promiscuous teen (des-

perate for the love and attention this man had removed), there was only one way I could frame my behavior: *I was a whore*. A horrible, terrible person. That identity was my internal self-description for the next twenty years, and I lived it out in a variety of ways.

I never told a soul about my double life, and I protected my secret with overachievement and perfection. I followed my father and brothers in pouring myself into church work. At the same time, I medicated my loneliness and shame with relationships that were both intense and sexual.

I thought that getting married would cure my promiscuity. Soon, though, I discovered my husband couldn't fill the gaping, black hole inside, which I could only identify as an aching, tender place within. Eventually, I resumed my pattern of looking for love in the arms of men. With each affair, I shrouded my heart in another blanket of shame. I knew my behavior was wrong, but I was powerless to stop despite my many attempts. At that point, I had no clue that what I was doing fit the classic definition of an addiction.

My diagnosis of cervical cancer caused by a sexually transmitted disease was God's wake-up call on my life. I was forced to confirm for David the affairs he'd long suspected and chosen to ignore. The diagnosis propelled us onto a path we had never dreamed we would walk. A path that today we view with immense gratitude.

At first we focused on my physical healing, and I went through three surgeries in the next twelve months. Eventually, the cancer was gone and my body healed. But I discovered my spirit and soul were still diseased.

Despite my good intentions, I continued in my latest affair. I knew my behavior (including unprotected sex) was literally killing me, and I was powerless to stop. Finally, with desperate thoughts of suicide bouncing darkly behind my eyes, I did something I'd never done before: *I asked for help*. I called a dear friend, poured out my truth, and received grace that was shocking and amazing. I started an intense period of therapy, and the healing began.

With the help of a gifted Christian counselor, I came to understand my story. I put the responsibility for my early sexual activity

back on the abuser, which is where it belonged. I grieved the abandonment from my mother and my father, and I saw that my affairs were just false solutions to deep inner pain and legitimate needs. Eventually, I let others into my life when I became active in a Twelve Step group for recovery from sexual addiction. With the help of safe, intimate friends, I was able to end unsafe, sinful affairs. I learned what genuine intimacy felt like, and to my surprise, it wasn't sexual.

I learned that sexual addiction really isn't about sex at all, which is something I had intuitively always known. It is an *intimacy disorder*—a desperate search for love, touch, affirmation, affection and approval. Obviously, sexual addiction is false intimacy and a false solution for legitimate needs, but it's driven by pain and loneliness, not by physical gratification. The cry of the heart is for intimate connection with yourself, with others, and with God, whom I never believed could love or care for a “whore” like me.

The best part of the healing process was coming to know a God I'd never imagined—a God of pursuing grace who was fully able to meet my needs. I traded my rules-based religion for relationship-based spirituality. (Grace motivates in a way that shame cannot, and I longed to respond to God's love with obedience, rather than perform out of fear.) In every way, I became a “new creature.”

Obviously, my marriage improved when I remained faithful to it. But David and I discovered after a few years that our healing journey was still significantly incomplete. Though David looked like the much healthier one in our coupleship (after all, he hadn't had affairs or done the terrible things I had), our counselor gently identified his own areas of impairment. We realized David had his own demons to deal with, especially in the area of his profound, untreated depression, which crippled and isolated him.

David too was raised in a clergyman's family, though his upbringing was significantly healthier than mine. He was spared sexual abuse and other forms of recognizable trauma. He had loving parents and a brother who were positive figures in his life. But David's internal landscape was shaped in ways just as profound as mine. When he was a young child, his father had an extended hos-

pitalization for catatonic depression, which in the dark days of mental health treatment in the 1950s was just as shameful as sex addiction is today. His family was embarrassed, and they never talked about their experience.

During their dad's hospitalization, David's brother went to live with family members 300 miles away, because his hyperactivity was too much for their stressed mother to handle. (No one knew of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, in the 1950s either.) David learned the best way to navigate life was to be quiet, avoid attention or conflict, ignore his own needs and wait for the hard times to pass. He struggled with an intimacy disorder—which was actually just the other side of the coin from mine.

Unknowingly, David and I were two wounded people who had each found another wounded person to dovetail with our pain. For each of us, the greatest (unrecognized) fear was abandonment, and we unconsciously believed we'd found someone who would never leave us like the key figures of our childhood. In David's stability, I thought I'd found security, and in my dominant personality, he thought he'd found someone resilient and strong like his mother. Sadly, we both were wrong.

Yet God gave our marriage a new beginning, one that didn't come until we thought the marriage was over. We were surprised to discover God had an amazing plan for our coupleship. From our deepest wounds, including the ones we'd inflicted on each other, our heavenly father forged our deepest healing. After two-and-a-half years of my sobriety from sexual addiction and significant healing from core trauma, we took a second major turn in the road when David embraced his own healing journey. He began to explore his story and how it had shaped the man he had become. He discovered crucial things about himself that had affected our relationship, and he bravely addressed them. He did so in his sweet, methodical fashion, which by this point I had come to appreciate.

David learned how to identify his feelings and fears and how to share them with me, which was very difficult for him. He risked stating his needs and engaging in healthy conflict. He did his own recov-

ery work, including taking part in a Twelve Step program for co-sex addiction. He stepped up to the plate and assumed responsibility for his part in our relationship dance.

Slowly, we learned what it meant to be a genuinely intimate couple. We became emotional and spiritual partners, instead of just practical cohorts. The roots of our coupleship grew deeper and our bond stronger. I discovered that dear practical David, who for years had felt emotionally unavailable to me, was actually the one man in my life who had not abandoned me. And David found that despite the deep ways I had betrayed him, I was deeply committed to him and accepted him exactly as he was. We encouraged each other to develop into our healthy, true selves. We found that we greatly complemented each other's strengths and compensated for each other's weaknesses. Together, we became something neither of us could be alone.

Our journeys, separate and together, have moved past our personal lives and have evolved into ministry. At that "finished" point of coming to the end of myself, I thought God was through with me. How could I ever do anything positive for God after the profound ways I had failed him? In this area too I was graced with a new beginning. After a year or two of coffee-cup counseling, where I talked informally with other women who had similar stories, I returned to graduate school and earned a master's degree to counsel professionally. Quickly my practice centered on sexual addiction and sexual trauma. Before long I came to direct a Christ-centered, therapeutic workshop program for those affected by sexual addiction.

Bethesda Workshops now serves clients from across the country who come to Nashville for help and hope. In this effort David and I are a meaningful team. I'm the front person, the one visible and in charge, but David is a steady contributing force. He hauls materials to the workshop site and helps with anything behind the scenes that needs doing. He keeps the home fires burning when I'm gone for workshops or speaking engagements, and he supports me when I'm tired or discouraged. When we started affirming each other's natural gifts, we discovered how much we needed each other—and how fulfilling and fun it is to enhance each other.

A few years ago another tragedy provided a measuring stick of how far we'd come since our end and our new beginning. We were stunned when David was diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma—advanced kidney cancer. His prognosis was bleak.

One night we were rocking quietly in our darkened den, and David pulled me into his lap and held me close. “I want you to know that no matter what happens, it'll be okay,” he promised. “I'm at peace with this situation, and I have no regrets. I'm grateful that we've had such a good life.”

I looked at him incredulously. “A *good life*? Now I know you're really sick,” I teased. “Where were you during all those awful years? How can you say we've had a good life together?”

David was quiet a few seconds and then responded in his typical understated way. “Yeah, we've had some hard times, I guess. But it took those tough times to get us where we are tonight, and I wouldn't trade being here for anything.”

At that moment, I knew the outcome had been worth all the pain of the journey. L'Amour's promise was true: at the time you think everything is finished, that will be the beginning.*

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PART ONE

THE PROBLEM

WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY



Jesus went across to Mount Olives, but he was soon back in the Temple again. Swarms of people came to him. He sat down and taught them. The religion scholars and Pharisees led in a woman who had been caught in an act of adultery. They stood her in plain sight of everyone and said, “Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the Law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?” They were trying to trap him into saying something incriminating so they could bring charges against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the dirt. They kept at him, badgering him. He straightened up and said, “The sinless one among you, go first: Throw the stone.” Bending down again, he wrote some more in the dirt.

Hearing that, they walked away, one after another, beginning with the oldest. The woman was left alone. Jesus stood up and spoke to her. “Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?”

“No one, Master.”

“Neither do I,” said Jesus. “Go on your way. From now on, don’t sin.” (John 8:1-11 *The Message*)

THE SECRET SIN OF SEXUAL ADDICTION



Maria frowned as she pulled into the garage. It was 2:30 a.m.—much later than she'd planned to be out. She hoped her husband or children wouldn't wake up and realize she was just now getting home. She'd have to remember to tell the girlfriend she was supposed to have been with that she had stayed out this late just in case her husband mentioned it. She wondered if he had any clue about where she'd really been. Probably not, she reassured herself. He was pretty clueless in general, she thought. His dullness was why her life needed some excitement.

On the other hand, Maria felt guilty for deceiving him. All things considered, he was a decent guy. He didn't deserve what she had done in violating her marriage vows. Maria was ashamed she had again so quickly broken her promise to God that she wouldn't be with her lover again. Just last Sunday she had gone forward during the altar call. But she was bored in her marriage and her lover was so attentive. They had such a powerful connection! Surely it wasn't hurting her husband if he didn't know. After all, her other affairs hadn't harmed him, had they?

Maria tossed her head as if to shake off the competing thoughts.

At the moment, she had practical things to consider—like how to avoid her husband’s detecting she smelled like another man’s cologne. She decided to get up early and shower before he was awake. Her escapades sure were less complicated when she was single.

Maria vowed to make up for her sin by being extra nice. She resolved to be more patient with the children. She’d get up early and fix pancakes for breakfast. Maybe they could even go for ice cream after school. She’d work an extra shift at the church bazaar. She’d plan something special for her Bible class Sunday morning. She’d be on time and more responsible with the checkbook. She’d pull it back together somehow. She had to.

Maria sighed. The thought of her church friends made her shudder. What would they think of her if they knew? Everyone believed she was so together. So religious. She could never face them if she were discovered! The familiar, sick feeling washed over her. She felt overwhelmed with shame. Yet she felt so driven. So powerless to stop what she knew in her heart was wrong. *I’m nothing more than a hypocrite*, she thought. The self-judgment stung, but she couldn’t deny it. *Why else do I do what I do?*

Tomorrow, she resolved. *I’ll stop the affair tomorrow. I can do it this time. I know I can. I have to!*

You may be shocked by Maria’s story. Or perhaps you view her situation as unusual. Surely only a handful of women are involved in this type of sexual sin. And, of course, none of them could be “good” women who go to church and are married and car pool their children and hold down a job. Women who sleep around must be different. Aren’t they easily recognizable as the cheap women they are? Their hair is bleached blond or colored a brassy red. They wear figure-enhancing clothes. And figure-revealing. They swish their hips when they walk and bat their eyes seductively. They live in that bad part of town and socialize with questionable kinds of companions. They use vulgar language. They abuse alcohol and drugs. You’d never come in contact with them in your circle. Surely.

The truth is that Maria’s story is painfully common. She represents thousands of women, including Christian women, who are involved

in sexually sinful and addictive behavior. Maria could be your tennis partner, your lawyer, your child's teacher, your neighbor. She could have sung that beautiful solo in church last Sunday morning. Maybe she greeted you in the grocery store last night. She is any one of untold numbers of women who are trapped in sexual sin and feel there is no way out. Perhaps Maria describes even you.

Sexual misconduct is, by nature and necessity, a secret sin. If Maria were going to share her struggle with someone, where would she turn? Could she tell her pastor? The minister's spouse? Would she be comfortable confessing her affair to her small group or her Sunday school class? Would she dare to ask for the prayers of the church and specifically divulge why? Maria is afraid even to call the crisis hotline or visit a counselor. She doesn't think anyone could understand her struggle, much less help her. She doesn't trust she wouldn't be stoned for her sins.

Women like Maria (and perhaps like you) feel all alone. Because no one in the church talks about sexual temptations, especially among women, it's easy to believe no other female has similar issues. When was the last time you heard an honest, nonhumorous discussion among Christian women about their difficulties and struggles in the sexual area? Have you ever heard such a conversation? I believe that silence about sexual matters is a great shortcoming of the church. Have you gotten the message sexual problems are simply too bad to talk about?

Sexual addiction is a secret sin that has been around since biblical times, yet it has been denied, ignored, undiagnosed and untreated for centuries. Those within religious communities have been quick to condemn such sin, and rightfully so, but they also have been unwilling or unable to understand the sexual sinner and offer her the help she so desperately needs.

The shame associated with sexual mistakes is profound. Sexual sin has typically been considered somehow worse than other kinds of sins. When you think of King David, the sin of adultery usually comes to mind before his sin of murder. The fear of being discovered in sexual sin makes it especially difficult for strugglers to ask for help.

And when the problem has escalated beyond “just” a rare or occasional sexual slip into the realm of sexual addiction, the shame can be paralyzing.

Ignorance and misunderstanding about the concept of an addiction to sex is widespread. Knowledge and research is fairly new. Only in the last thirty years has attention been directed toward this area. The whole field is probably at the point where alcoholism was fifty years ago. Then, you may remember, people viewed alcoholism as simply moral failure. Most shamed the alcoholic and told her to “just stop!” Today, though, we understand much more about the disease of alcoholism, including the proven biological components. Now if someone admits to being a recovering alcoholic, she likely receives unqualified respect. Even within the church, the sober alcoholic often enjoys affirmation for facing the problem and turning her life around. Friends join her in celebrating her recovery.

But when someone admits to being a *sexual* addict, the reaction is quite different: “You’re a what?” The response is usually horror and disgust. Or fear. Some sex addicts report people avoided them and kept their children away too. “My friends didn’t want me around their daughters,” one male addict said. “I’ve never considered being sexual with a child, but they immediately assumed I was some kind of pedophile.” One female addict’s church asked her to leave when she revealed she had struggled years before with sexual sin. She reported, “I felt like I had leprosy.”

As if the shame of being addicted to sex isn’t bad enough, the stigma of being a woman who struggles with this problem is particularly intense. I sometimes tease my male colleagues who are recovering sex addicts that my shame is greater than their shame. I honestly believe that’s accurate. Our culture has the attitude that “boys will be boys” or that illicit sexual behavior is “just a male thing.” A female who has a sexual addiction is considered especially perverted. After all, women aren’t even supposed to like sex. We’re the ones with the proverbial headaches.

The female sex addict quickly embraces an identity of shame, rather than seeing herself as created in the image of God. She ques-

tions whether God even loves her at all. How could she be a Christian and remain involved in sexual sin? The only way to make sense of that dual reality is to condemn herself. My own self-description (privately, at least) was “slut.” I knew what I was doing was wrong; I knew I couldn’t stop. The only conclusion must be that I was a horrible, terrible person. The label that matched how I felt inside was “whore.” The juxtaposition of my heart for God and my lust of the flesh caused me to doubt my salvation. I was afraid of being stoned by God.

A common assumption is that sex addicts are nothing more than moral failures who are weak of character and will. Clearly they must lack faith and genuine commitment to God. If they would only try harder and be more intentional in their Bible study and prayers, they wouldn’t sin sexually. These beliefs are inaccurate and only compound an addict’s shame. Perhaps like you, most sexually addicted women have prayed about their problem and begged God to free them from its power. They’ve read God’s Word and been convicted of their sin. They have tried to stop and have been unable to maintain abstinence from inappropriate sexual behavior. If the solution were as simple as taking these steps, far fewer women would remain enslaved. Failure to stop acting out, despite their best intentions, only increases these women’s shame. To be judged as nothing more than morally corrupt adds to that pain.

While sexual addiction is unquestionably sinful behavior, to stop with this explanation alone is to miss other critical factors that are involved. Sexual addiction is also a disease. It’s not an “either-or” issue. It is “both/and.” If the question is, Is it a disease or is it sin? the answer is yes. My guess is that if you personally struggle with sex addiction, you already intuitively understand this idea.

I’ll discuss thoroughly the disease concept of addiction in chapter three. At this point, please simply accept the challenge to look beyond a one-dimensional, moral explanation for what is, in truth, a complex and multifaceted problem. Accepting sexual addiction as a bona fide disease doesn’t in any way absolve an addict from responsibility for her sinful behavior. She clearly must admit her im-

morality, become convicted of her status as a sinner before God, repent of her actions and lust, and turn from her behavior. Her recovery will be temporary and shallow, however, if she only takes these spiritual steps.

Perhaps a helpful illustration is to compare sexual addiction to the disease of diabetes. While no one denies the clear biomedical nature of diabetes, we also understand the patient's responsibility to implement life-long choices in managing that disease. It is the foolish diabetic who shrugs her responsibility to modify her eating and lifestyle habits because she "has a disease" and "can't help it." In a similar way, it's up to the sexual addict to seek treatment for her disease of addiction and follow through consistently with those measures that are necessary for sobriety.

If the church and individual Christians want to help sexually addicted women—those "caught in adultery" as Scripture describes the woman brought to Jesus—they must put down their stones of condemnation and offer a way out. I'm not recommending excusing or condoning sexual addicts' behavior. I'm simply suggesting Christians move beyond the barrier of judgment and discard their stones of shame.

Even the Master said, "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What label(s) have you applied to yourself?
2. Have you told anyone about your struggle? What reaction did you get?
3. What is it like to find a book devoted to female sex addiction?