

INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

When You Lose Yourself In An Affair ...



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Liar, liar, pants on fire ... so goes the old nursery rhyme.

As South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford made his tearful public confession of his long-term infidelity with his Argentine mistress “soul-mate” (and other women), I wondered — like many of you — “how could he manage to orchestrate a double life for so many years”? How could he be such a liar? Has truth become more of a rarity or are we just getting better at naming the witch (or the warlock, in this case)?

I’m reminded of a popular television game show, “To Tell The Truth.” The show had a celebrity panel whose job it was to correctly identify the occupation of a contestant from two other “impostors.” Two contestants could tell lies to fool the panel, but the real person was sworn to tell the truth. In the end, the truthful contestant revealed himself or herself.

It takes a lot of effort and careful orchestration to maintain a lie. Keeping all those stories straight. You have to remember whom you told you were going to the Appalachians to “take a hike” and whom you asked to meet you at the airport in Buenos Aires.

So many ordinary couples swear they don’t have time in their busy schedules for sex. I’m amazed when I hear how people having affairs simultaneously juggle several partners so adroitly.

But the question I’ve been hearing discussed most is how does one’s higher judgment become hijacked? How can values be pushed aside for a “morality of convenience”? What occurs that makes it acceptable to humiliate your life partner, hurt your family and disappoint so many others, all in the service of self-gratification?

Obviously these are complex questions that differ for each individual. But in all situations where we live “double lives” there is a process called “splitting” that compartmentalizes the so-called “real self” and the “fictionalized self.”

Splitting usually begins with a secret. Maintaining the split requires energy to deny consequences and perpetuate the fractured, destructive, powerfully reinforcing charade. Over time, the part of us that contains the secret grows larger, leaving a less colorful, less interesting real self to interact with those in our immediate environment. People will often describe the real self and the affiliations of the real self as “familiar, secure, but boring.” Not until the “membrane” containing the invented fictionalized self ruptures can disclosure and healing begin.

When individuals split in this way, they sometimes lose track of their real self. It’s like a game of “Where’s Waldo?” Is the part with four sons and a wife the primary persona or is the part with the soul mate in Argentina the core self? Which part contains the person’s heart, loyalty and devotion?

If you’re living a double life, there is no authenticity in either relationship. Both involvements are false to some degree because no one has the whole person. Everyone loses.

Sexual exploits are obviously not new, but when they occur in public officials, they stimulate a predictable voyeuristic fascination. Although we aren’t naïve enough to believe our political leaders are above moral reproach, we wish that they were and that they would bring more honor and less shame to their elected offices, their trusting constituents, their families, and our nation.

But when these so-called demigods tumble from their idealized pedestals forced to face public castigation, the rubbernecking that ensues feeds the media frenzy.

As many couples sit at home watching the Sanford apology on the news, sucking their teeth and shaking their heads in disbelief, others are wiping their sweaty brows fearing it is only a matter of time before their own little sexual misdeed gets exposed.

Like the game show, we must each stand up eventually, claim our real identity, and tell the truth.

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