

Is Purity Culture a Form of Sexual Abuse?

By Alice Greczyn

It started off as a normal September afternoon. I was standing at my kitchen stove, one of those janky ones with coils for burners, and my friend Luke was sitting at the table next to me while I made us dinner. I was telling him about a recent hike I went on with a new guy friend of mine when, suddenly, Luke's whole demeanor shifted. His shoulders tensed and his usually gentle voice took a sharp edge. He started interrogating me, asking who was this guy? Did he like me? Did I like him?

I struggled to answer Luke's questions without showing my nervousness. I had never seen him that upset before, and I'd known him for a couple of years. His questions also confused me. Luke knew I didn't date. He knew I was saving myself for my future husband, and that I had never even kissed or held hands with a guy. I figured Luke was just being overprotective—I was only 17, and since he was 20 and like an older brother to me, I told myself that he was just looking out for my safety. But his questions wouldn't stop. He seemed suspicious. Angry, even. Finally, I called him out on it.

"It seems like you're acting jealous," I said. "Why?"

"Because," Luke said, staring straight into my eyes. "God told me you're my future wife."

Everything slowed. The light seemed to tunnel out of the kitchen. All I could hear was the whirring of a fan, and only my hand resting on the stove kept me upright. It didn't occur to me to ask Luke how he heard God. I never knew how God told anyone anything.

Something inside me wanted to cry out in protest, to tell Luke that he couldn't be my future husband, because I didn't love him, not in that way. But I silenced that cry out of sheer terror. I believed Luke's revelation was God's revelation, and I couldn't go against God. I didn't have time to think, and so I made the split-second decision to go along with it. I felt I had to go along with it, because to do otherwise would be to defy God, and to defy God would allow Satan to drag me to hell.

Luke was smiling at me. I smiled back, desperately hoping to cover up the betrayal I felt. I felt like Luke had betrayed me. God had betrayed me. And one week later, I felt like my father betrayed me.

I was sitting on my couch in numb silence when Luke called my dad to formally ask for my hand in marriage. I didn't realize how much I was hoping my father would say *no* until Luke's face broke into a smile. My heart felt like someone dropped it. Luke passed me the phone, and I heard my dad tell me that God had shown him a while ago Luke was the man I would marry—he'd been wondering when he'd get this call. Luke called his mother next; and as though God wanted to make extra sure that I was convinced marrying Luke was his will, Luke's mom said that she, too, had heard from God that I was going to marry her son. God's will couldn't have been clearer.

When the calls were finished, I turned to Luke, forcing another smile I didn't feel.

"So are we engaged now?" I asked.

He grinned at me. "Yeah, I guess we are."

It didn't seem possible. I'd never had a boyfriend. Now I had a fiancé. I blinked back tears, not knowing why I was so shocked. I had been groomed for that arrangement my whole life.

Purity Culture

I grew up in what is now called *purity culture*. Purity culture taught me that my love life would unfold in three ways: (a) I would remain a virgin until my wedding night, and I wouldn't so much as hold hands with a guy until I was engaged to him; (b) As a girl, I would dress modestly and be faithful to my husband all the days of my life, including before I knew him; and (c) I would never date, but I would know who my future husband was because God would confirm it through my spiritual elders, and especially through my dad. This is exactly how my story unfolded.

Purity culture is based on the belief that sex should be had only within heterosexual marriage, and that all lustful thoughts before marriage are sinful. In the Christian churches of my upbringing, merely having a crush on somebody was not only a sin, but also an act of betrayal toward my future spouse. One youth pastor said that we girls were like white porcelain dishes, and when we gave ourselves away, we let people spit all over our dish. What man would ever want to marry us and eat off a dirty dish?

The Bible says that, among God's holy people, there must be *not even a hint* of sexual impurity.¹ This teaching played out in my youth groups, with girls being handed oversized, baggy T-shirts if they showed up in a tank top that bared their arms. *Not even a hint* meant boys were urged to publicly repent if they watched pornography, so that the rest of us could hold them accountable for their sin. *Not even a hint* meant that, when I was accused of flirting with all the guys on a youth-group mission trip, I had to go to each one of them personally, with a pastor, and apologize to him for being a distraction. My crime was wearing baggy cargo shorts, and treating the guys too much like actual brothers instead of brothers-in-Christ, as evidenced by my comfortability around them. That was the first time I was made aware that the lust of men was my fault.

The shame that imprinted itself in me left long-lasting scars. By the time I was betrothed to Luke, I was instilled with a fear of my womanhood and resigned to the fact that my life would be ruled by the men God placed in it.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is an important aspect of purity culture. Although boys are also indoctrinated with the belief that they need to keep themselves pure until marriage, there is an inherent double standard in Judeo-Christianity that girls and women bear the brunt of. For instance, there is no biblically mandated test for a male's virginity, such as there is for females. In the Bible, girls are tested for their virginity by being sent to their wedding-night chambers with a white sheet. If there is no blood on the sheet after the groom is done having sex with her, the girl is then dragged to the front of her father's house and stoned to death for not being a virgin.²

Today, there are still cultures that punish girls and women for not bleeding on their wedding-night sheets. From Judaism to Hinduism, Mormonism to Islam, most girls are expected to be virgins when they marry. The consequences for one not being a virgin bride can range from social shunning to strangulation. Because of this, some women, from Utah to Pakistan, will buy an artificial hymen to insert in herself on her wedding night. The packet of fake blood will burst with intercourse, mimicking the alleged proof of her virginity and sparing her shame, and in some instances, saving her life.³

Today in evangelical America, we have things such as purity balls, at which girls in white dresses make vows of celibacy to God and to their fathers, who in turn vow to protect their daughters' chastity until they give them away in marriage.⁴ In the Midwest, fundamentalist parents plan matchmaking retreats where they can arrange marriages for their teenagers. The girls are reported to be between the ages of 13 and 20, so they can be fruitful and multiply, and parents of a chosen groom might pay the girl's parents a bride price.⁵ Some

call this sex trafficking, and child marriage is currently banned in only two of our 50 US states.⁶

I never went to a purity ball; but when my dad gave Luke permission to marry me, it absolutely felt like an arranged marriage. I was betrothed to a man not of my choosing, but of his, our parents', and God's. I use the word *betrothed* because that's what it felt like. That's the word the Bible uses to describe the giving away of a girl from one man to another. Women in the Bible don't marry for love. They are simply traded, like cattle. A girl in the Bible does not get engaged. There is no proposal. She is never asked. She is betrothed.

Breaking Away

It was my mom who gave me the courage to end my betrothal to Luke. She hadn't heard from God that I was supposed to marry Luke, but the reason I didn't trust her right away was because my mom had stopped going to church by the time I was 17. This meant she was a backslider, and I couldn't trust that she wasn't being used by Satan to lure me off the path of God's very clear will. Even so, my mom's words gave voice to my own inner truth. My inner truth was screaming at me that I shouldn't marry Luke, that I shouldn't marry a man I didn't love. My inner truth told me that men hid their desires behind God all the time, and this could be one of those times. My inner truth told me God might not even be real.

Two months passed. I wavered back and forth until, one day, I finally called Luke. I felt sick with fear as we made plans to meet in a public park, and I was so scared when I saw him that I would never be able to remember what I said. My mind went completely blank, the way I would later learn the minds of trauma victims sometimes did. In that moment, I wasn't only ending my betrothal to Luke. I was overtly going against God's will for the first time—and not just his will for my life, but his will for Luke's life. I knew what happened to those who went against God's will. God let Satan destroy them, because when they disobeyed God, they stepped outside the umbrella of his protection.

What I do recall from that day is that I was shaking. I remember hearing myself at one point, telling Luke never to call me, never to text me, and never to contact me in any way again, ever. I was terrified to hear the words coming out of my mouth. It was the voice of my inner truth.

The Repercussions

I wish I could tell you that I always spoke from my inner truth after that day. I wish I could tell you that, after ending my betrothal, I went on to have a healthy love life as a young adult. But that wouldn't be sharing my truth with you now.

Programming

A few years after ending my betrothal, I lost my faith altogether. With the loss of my faith came the freedom to finally have sex. After so many years of keeping myself pure and saving myself for one man and one man only, I was free to sleep with anyone I wanted. I tried. But the teachings of purity culture were deeply ingrained in me. I began having anxiety attacks after sex. These anxiety attacks left me crying and hyperventilating in my bed as I desperately tried to remind myself that there was no devil to fear, and that I had nothing wrong to be ashamed of. But two decades of programming is hard to undo.

Purity culture had programmed me, the way it has programmed so many others, to fuse shame and fear with sex. I learned that, just because our minds accept that something is no longer true, our neurological wiring is not able to simply undo itself. My wires of fear, shame, and sex were closely wound together. Purity culture taught me that my worth was in my virginity. On a subconscious level, losing my virginity meant losing my worth.

I know I'm one of the lucky ones. I may have found myself facing an arranged marriage at 17, and I may have suffered anxiety attacks after sex as a young adult; but I know my struggles, though valid, pale in comparison to some of the sexual traumas others go through. The reason I am choosing to share my experiences is because I also know I'm not alone. If you grew up like me, with every aspect of your sexual purity being controlled, and if, like me, you have downplayed the aftereffects of purity culture because you worry no one will take you seriously, I hope it might validate you, as it validated me, to know that symptoms of religious trauma and sexual trauma can often go hand in hand.

Religion is not always benign. Abuse is not always invasive.

Effects of Abuse

What purity culture and sexual abuse have in common is the violation of your sexual agency. Both teach you that your body belongs to someone else, that your needs and wants don't matter, and that the consequences of resistance could be high, even death. Is it any wonder, then, to learn that the side effects of purity culture and the side effects of sexual abuse can be so similar?

In the early 2000s, therapy offices across the United States saw a sudden spike of young adults seeking treatment for what has since been described as an "epidemic of shame."⁷ One of the first therapists to notice this epidemic was Dr. Tina Schermer Sellers. I first learned of Dr. Tina in a book by Linda Kay Klein called *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*. Dr. Tina told Klein that the symptoms she was seeing were exactly the same symptoms she might see in someone who had been sexually abused. What made it so puzzling to her was that many of these young people said they had never been sexually abused.

The timing of this surge of people seeking help for sexual trauma, sometimes with no sexual experience at all, pointed Dr. Tina to the boom of purity culture in the mid to late '90s. This was the era of promise rings and purity retreats, of abstinence-only sex ed, and books such as Joshua Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. This was the era of my youth. Klein describes in *Pure...* how my generation was bombarded at home, at church, and at school with the message that sex was wrong and our bodies were sinful.⁸ We became adults in the early and mid 2000s, and it was then that therapists such as Dr. Tina began to see the repercussions of what is now called *purity culture*.

Some of these repercussions resemble post-traumatic stress disorder: Panic attacks. Paranoia. Nightmares. Dissociative states. Depression. Eating disorders. Self-harm. Many of these symptoms remain dormant until they're triggered by something—sometimes something as light as kissing, or even just talking about sex. One of the most devastating repercussions is a condition some women get called *vaginismus*. Vaginismus causes an involuntary tightening of the muscles around the vagina, making sex extremely painful and often impossible. Sometimes vaginismus is a symptom of sexual assault. Other times it's a symptom of purity culture.

I know the story of one virgin bride who discovered she had vaginismus. She was very much looking forward to having sex with her husband, but every time they tried in the months following their wedding, her body shut down in pain, blocking him from entering her. She had unwittingly trained her body to shut down this way through years of shutting down any sexual thoughts or sensations whatsoever. Sex was so painful that she ended up having to have surgery.

Then there's the story of a girl who had surgery because she *wanted* sex with her husband to be painful. She'd lost her virginity in college, and when she became engaged, she opted to have hymen reconstruction surgery. She wanted to be a born-again virgin on her wedding night and have the blood from a newly torn hymen to prove it.

Religion often teaches girls that purity means pain, one way or another.

Of course, women aren't the only ones affected by the more harmful teachings of purity culture. In *Pure...*, Klein shares an observation from one of her interviewees, who pointed out that, if women are told their bodies are evil, men are taught that their minds are. The Bible teaches that simply looking at a woman lustfully is the same as committing adultery with her.⁹ The punishment Jesus advises? Gouging out your eyes if they cause you to lust, and chopping off your hand if it causes you to sin.¹⁰ Though these verses are often interpreted as metaphors in the modern-day church, their construal as dictates against lust and masturbation are valid. When boys and men fail to suppress their natural urges, many believe themselves worthy of punishment, including checking themselves into months'-long rehabilitation centers, convinced they have sex addictions. Others struggle for years with what one guy I know simply describes as "crippling shame." After being kicked out of his religious university for having sex with his girlfriend, another man I know of committed suicide.¹¹ Shame can be deadly.

The psychological and physical effects of purity culture are still being brought to light. Certainly not everyone raised in an environment that promotes sexual abstinence feels harmed by it; and psychological observations suggest that people sharing the same experience may be affected in vastly different ways—one may feel unscathed while another feels traumatized. Trauma is not an event itself, but the subjective experience of an event or series of events.¹² The trauma response of the brain, or lack thereof, is unique to each individual; and where some perceive a threat, others may see protection. The intentions of those advocating some of the teachings of purity culture may be good in many cases. But for those of us who do internalize these teachings with intense fear and shame, the lack of understanding or discussion about their darker effects can leave many feeling isolated and alone. Furthermore, many doctors and therapists are afraid of being seen as antireligious if they connect a patient's sexual-trauma symptoms to their spiritual beliefs; and because of the taboos surrounding sex in most religious communities, many individuals continue suffering in mystification and silence, going untreated.

The good news is that symptoms of sexual trauma resulting from purity culture often can be treated.

The Healing

Everyone's path to healing is unique. Recent years have seen an uptick in counselors and therapists familiar with the repercussions of being raised in purity culture, and many have been there themselves. Some approaches to recovery from this brand of sexual shame involve traditional psychotherapy, while other methods take a less conventional approach. I found healing through a combination of the two.

I was in therapy for nearly three years following my departure from faith. Therapy helped me work through a lot of the anxiety I had around dating and sex, encouraging me to explore and maintain healthy boundaries as I did so. Another way I found healing was far less expected. Through an unlikely string of events, I started working as an actress and model when I was 17. When I was 18, and still reeling from ending my betrothal to Luke, I accepted the offer of a topless modeling job. I was fully aware that I was in no small way rebelling against purity culture. Rebellion, I learned, can sometimes be good medicine.

During the photoshoot, something happened to me. Something good. While I stood under black and blue lights, almost completely naked, and while the male photographer was shooting me and making me feel safe, I made a conscious decision: that I would let my inhibitions go as I had never let them go before. And there in that dark, safe space, staring straight into the camera lens, I felt something come over me that I had never felt before. I felt power. And what is power if not an opposite of shame?

The first thing many women do when they leave religious purity culture is rebel against it. Amish girls on Rumspringa might have boudoir photos taken. Women who leave the FLDS church might cut their hair and wear makeup. Ex-Muslim women might trade their burqas for bikinis. Reclaiming power takes many forms, and some may dismiss these actions as juvenile, as an understandable yet overreactive bucking of authority. I think the motive behind many such rebellions is far deeper, far more profound, and sacredly beautiful. These actions are often not only symbols of defiance. They also are symbols of deliverance, of liberation, and the fierce proclamation of self-ownership. We are more than rebels. We are healers, finding wholeness through the uninhibited embrace of our sensuality.

That day, I let my body move however I wanted to. I was fully in my senses, aware of my hair, my goosebumps, my breath, my beauty. My power. I know this story might be a little unconventional to share; but finding healing through the power of my sensuality is my truth, and it was modeling that first introduced me to this. I left my photoshoot feeling like a significant transformation had taken place. I didn't know what to call it. I didn't have a name for the freedom that I felt unleash within my body, accompanied by an unspoken and resounding vow that my body and I were never going back. We were never going back to shame. We were never going back to suppression. We were never going back to powerlessness. I would later think of that photoshoot as a mystical experience, as a profound moment of healing where, for the first time, I forgave myself for being a woman.

What I know now is that I was experiencing a glimmer of what therapists and coaches might call *embodiment*: getting out of my head and connecting to the wisdom of my body. Because of that experience modeling, I started taking dance classes—pole-dance classes. I danced for no one but myself, and letting myself move without fear of condemnation or consequence allowed my body to release years of stored shame.

Follow Your Truth

I'm not saying everyone needs to do a topless photoshoot or learn to pole dance to release themselves from shame. But I hope what you might take away from my sharing my truth is the encouragement to find and live in your own. Diverse journeys have brought us to where we are today. These ongoing diverse journeys will help us continue to heal into the people we'll be tomorrow. I don't think there is a right or wrong way to heal. I think we all must determine for ourselves what is true for us and what is not.

Purity culture was real to me, but it was never true. Although I still can recognize some of the scars of shame it has left me with, I feel so grateful to myself for having the courage to listen to my inner truth and learn how to follow it.

If you also find yourself struggling with sexual or romantic difficulties that you suspect might be the result of purity culture, this is your permission to consider it. Consider exploring with a knowledgeable therapist or a trauma-informed embodiment coach any connections that come up. I used to belittle my experiences because I felt they weren't severe enough to merit the label of *trauma* or *abuse*. Others, I thought, had it far worse. But that doesn't mean I don't deserve healing from what I experienced. That doesn't mean you don't deserve healing from what you experienced. It means we can acknowledge the ways purity culture may have affected us so we can finally begin to heal. It means we get to walk in our own truth, whatever that means to each of us. It means we get to be free.

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Author's Note: I would like to acknowledge that this article does not address the painful ways purity culture has affected the LGBTQ+ community. This was a conscious omission for two reasons: (a) religious purity culture is often implicitly heterosexual, with expressions of nonheterosexuality and nonbinary gender identification so deeply condemned that they are often ignored altogether in abstinence and courtship teachings; and (b) as a heterosexual ciswoman, I cannot speak to any experience within purity culture but my own. And for the

sake of brevity, I decided to keep the focus of this piece on what I can personally attest to, knowing those who identify as LGBTQ+ can speak to their experiences far better than I can extrapolate. I sincerely apologize for any offense this omission has caused.

Notes

[1] Ephesians 5:3.

[2] Deuteronomy 22:13–21.

[3] Renee Ghert-Zand, "Women Simulate Virginity With Artificial Hymens," *The Times of Israel*, December 18, 2015. Available online at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/women-simulate-virginity-with-artificial-hymens/>

[4] Priscilla Frank, "Welcome to the Bizarre and Beautiful World of Purity Balls," *HuffPost*, May 5, 2014; updated December 6, 2017. Available online at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/purity-ball-photos_n_5255904

[5] Michael Stone, "Conference Will Arrange Child Marriages for Christian Homeschoolers," *Progressive Secular Humanist*, May 5, 2016.

[6] "About Child Marriage," *Unchained At Last*, 2017. Available online at <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/laws-to-end-child-marriage/>

[7] David J. Ley, PhD, "Overcoming Religious Sexual Shame," *Psychology Today*, August 23, 2017. Available online at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/women-who-stray/201708/overcoming-religious-sexual-shame>

[8] Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, Atria Books, September 4, 2018.

[9] Matthew 5:28.

[10] Matthew 5:29–30.

[11] Jeremy Fuster, "Imagine Dragons' Dan Reynolds Talks Confronting Mormon Suicide in 'Believer' (Video)," *The Wrap*, January 21, 2018. Available online at <https://www.thewrap.com/imagine-dragons-dan-reynolds-confronting-mormon-suicide-in-believer-video/>

[12] Esther Giller, "What Is Psychological Trauma?," Sidran Institute Traumatic Stress Education and Advocacy, May 1999. Available online at <https://www.sidran.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/What-Is-Psychological-Trauma.pdf>

About the Author

Alice Greczyn is an actress, writer, and the founder of Dare to Doubt. Midwest-raised and LA-based, Alice's modeling career as a teenager led to an acting career in Hollywood. She's best known for her roles on teen shows such as ABC Family/Freeform's *The Lying Game* and *Lincoln Heights*, and occasionally someone recognizes her as the Amish girl from the movie *Sex Drive*. Alice is fascinated by the subjective experience of life, which she explores through acting and storytelling. Her own story includes a painful yet rewarding transition from evangelical Christianity to atheism, a journey that inspired her to found DaretoDoubt.org as a resource site for people detaching from belief systems they come to find harmful. Encouraging people to trust themselves and live courageously in their own

truth is what gives Alice a sense of purpose. She loves hiking, traveling, and pondering answerless questions. alicegreczyn.com