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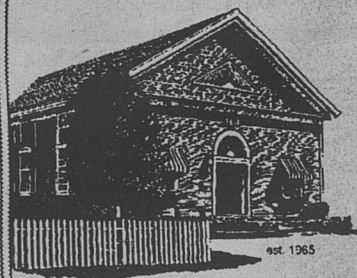
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Views: Abstinence vs. Whatever

Recently I watched the daytime talk show, *The Other Half*, co-hosted by three men apparently chosen exclusively for their all-American, multi-cultural good looks. The program and its name are Dick Clark's answer to *The View*, Barbara Walter's TV creation and vehicle for women's perspectives.

During the first half of *The Other Half*, the hosts made adolescent jokes and ogled the petite, tall and full-figured women dressed by a fashion expert and paraded out to illustrate how less-than-perfect females can maximize their meager assets by wearing clothes that minimize their abundant liabilities.

The second half opened with the introduction of a young couple who had recently married on another TV show, and became fifteen-minutely famous for having made it all the way from their first meeting to the conclusion of their marriage vows without once engaging one another in sex, kissing each other, or being physical together in any way. The couple left out any mention of previous relationships and their interviewers didn't ask. While the hosts and audience gushed and applauded, I sat wondering why anyone would want to know.

Then it hit me. This couple was not merely advocating sexual abstinence but, by omission, condemning safe sex. A few minutes into the conversation my suspicions were confirmed.

One host drilled the couple with a series of questions that finally convinced him of the impossible — that the couple really, truly had not been physical with each other in any way. Then a co-host, who made it plain he viewed the couple's brush with innocence as an insurmountable ordeal, asked them if they had, at any time, considered safe sex. The couple assured him that they had not because they believed so deeply in abstinence, at which point all three interviewers were suddenly transformed from facetious skeptics into beaming admirers. "That's wonderful!" one cooed. The audience clapped on cue. And safe sex was not mentioned again.

Next an interviewer approached the audience, where he spoke, one by one, with three young women who also claimed to have chosen sexual abstinence. I wouldn't exactly call them scantily clad but their clothes were certainly tight fitting. Each testified to her purity and as she spoke, her first name was emblazoned across the bottom of the TV screen accompanied by the salacious caption "Sixteen Year Old Virgin." I couldn't help wondering if any of them had been reared in religious fundamentalism.

And I thought about something a coworker who provides HIV prevention services to women told me.

thomas ziniti

She said she has met women who considered themselves virgins even though they had engaged in every sexual activity except vaginal intercourse, including unprotected anal intercourse.

I thought about men who pull over to the side of the road on their way from work to home, in search of occasional oral servicing. Many consider themselves heterosexual. There are male hustlers who submit to every kind of sex with johns, then later tell law enforcement officers and social workers they have never had sex with a man. Because they did it for money and the acts were not reciprocal, they reason, it wasn't sex.

My purpose is not to punch more holes in abstinence than are there already. In fact, I believe abstinence has merit. But I object strongly to its imbalanced and incomplete handling in this TV show. Mostly, though, I object to the way in which those who espouse abstinence (mainly religious fundamentalists and reactionary politicians) use it to contrive a polarized, and therefore irreconcilable, argument between abstinence and safe sex service providers.

Most of us agree that commercial television and the movies have created a sexually charged environment into which not only children, but also adults, are often irresistibly drawn. Everything from automobiles to shampoo to chewing gum is advertised by way of some association with sex, and one question on everybody's mind is what do we do about that. Regulating TV commercials would be complicated and it's an unlikely solution.

For those who advocate for the strictly-abstinence-based model then, the solution seems simple: "Just say no." But that's not all they're saying. They're also continuously perpetuating the myth that those of us who advocate for the safe-sex HIV-prevention model promote promiscuity, especially to the young. In the last ten years I have met and talked with many safe-sex-based AIDS service providers and not one of them has ever told me they handed out condoms because they believed their clients ought to have been having more sex.

The problem with the strictly-abstinence-based model is its horse-blind moral vision. To view sexual behavior morally is, I believe, appropri-

ate, but to make that the only consideration, to deny that we are also involved in a life and death struggle is naïve, and in the case of the current administration, cynical and disastrously irresponsible. In a sexually charged environment, such as both sides agree exists, handing out condoms isn't providing a license for promiscuity. It is, rather, more like throwing life preservers to drowning individuals. And, given the magnitude of the pandemic, what informed AIDS service provider genuinely dedicated to the preservation of life would not want to at least do that?

But while we do our work, the voice of strict abstinence gets louder, and the Bush administration's susceptibility to its influence means that every year more people are misled, and viable safe sex programs are forced to compete more vigorously for less funding. That is apparently not daytime television's problem, however, but ours.

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As ABC's *The Other Half* ended, the credits shot upward on the television screen. The audience clapped and cheered, not for the program's superficial content, which had already been forgotten, but at the show's three, dimple-faced dimwits whose grins were broad and sly as they snatched pillows off of the studio sofa and hurled them at one another. ▼

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