

# Why I'm still a virgin at age 26

By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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I like to talk about sex.

This is natural for a woman who grew up in a culture that surrounds us with it, who is the product of parents who taught me no topic is taboo.

But few who discuss sex with me are prepared for what I divulge: I'm a virgin.

Responses to my decision to save sex for marriage range from awkward silence to sympathy and have included the following question: "Do you really want to ruin your wedding night that way?"

I appreciate the concern. The shock that underlies it doesn't surprise me. In our culture, the norm is for adults — married or not — to have sex. According to a 2011 study published by the National Center for Health Statistics, about 97 percent of men and 98 percent of women ages 25 to 44 aren't virgins. So I — a 26-year-old virgin by choice — am one of the 2-percenters. Nowhere near the mainstream. Part of an insurrection (albeit a small one).

People who aren't proponents of saving sex for marriage have warned me it's imperative to learn what you like in sex and to confirm that what you like is what you'll get before you vow to spend the rest of your life with someone. This, they say, is because how good sex is ultimately depends on how consistently it satisfies you. Which implies that of sex's multiple purposes, pleasure is primary.

If it is, it is incomprehensible — even in my opinion — to marry someone with whom you haven't had sex. That kind of sex depends on experience. But the sex I am saving isn't that kind of sex.

The sex I save is rooted in chastity, which isn't the same as abstinence, but requires it until marriage. For some who save sex, the decision is underpinned by a moral code uninfluenced by faith and for others, by various religious affiliations.

My decision is underlain by my beliefs that temperance is a virtue, Jesus is God and it's important to love as he does. In Roman Catholic Christianity, chastity is a decision to die to self and to selflessly love (or to

die trying). People who practice it regard all people as intrinsically valuable, reject their objectification and uphold love as a choice in a culture that calls it a feeling.

Chastity shifts a person's focus from self to others, from what a potential husband could do for me to what he and I could do together — what we, as a unit, could contribute to the world. It is less about whether sex with him will be awkward at first and more about whether it would be a good thing for our future kids to grow up and turn into one of us.

For us, sex serves two purposes: procreation and unity. We don't believe we're supposed to decide to unite because sex is pleasurable, but to create a pleasurable sexual relationship with the person to whom we are permanently united.

So for us, sexual experience before marriage isn't necessary.

But according to many, it should be.

"A comfortable sexual routine should be established before you promise to spend the rest of your life with someone," wrote a young adult who responded to one of two informal sex surveys I recently conducted.

I sent the surveys to friends and strangers for feedback from people who are sexually experienced.

One said sex with some people is neither initially nor easily gratifying and "I don't want to be married to someone like that."

Another said "I want to know the sex I'm going to get is good enough to keep me loyal."

In the search for significant others, sexual satisfaction is so chiefly sought — at least for my generation — that the thought of waiting disturbs most of the people who don't.

"How do you know your marriage will work?" wrote one of my surveys' respondents. "What if you find out the sex isn't gratifying, that (your husband) has no idea what he's doing?"

The fear is of inadvertently committing to a life of unsatisfying sex. But that fear implies sex is static, that partners who aren't initially compatible are permanently incompatible. (And, incidentally, that "how to have better sex" advice is moot.)

According to my surveys' participants, it can take as "long" as a month for some couples to discover they are sexually incompatible; other couples, one person wrote, can tell after having sex once.

The quest, then, isn't really for sexual compatibility. It's for compatibility that's quick to cultivate, if not intuitive. But is that kind of compatibility desired because a relationship without it won't work, or because a relationship without it takes work?

Quick compatibility is important because sex should be "comfortable and have a flow to it," wrote one survey participant. "It's like dancing."

Which few are immediately good at and anyone can learn? Precisely. To achieve sexual compatibility — so I've heard — requires practice, communication, discomfort and vulnerability, none of which American culture encourages (unless it results in cash or glory). But what if the pursuit of that kind of sexual compatibility is at the expense of something more valuable?

Maybe it's to a relationship's disadvantage to pick a partner with whom you're effortlessly sexually compatible over a partner who is willing to work through conflict. Maybe we do each other a disservice when we search for consistently gratifying sex but avoid opportunities to become people who can communicate when it isn't. Maybe how willing we are to practice and communicate, and to be uncomfortable and vulnerable in sex predicts how willing we'll be to do those things in other parts of a relationship.

This sort of stuff hadn't dawned on me a few years ago, the first time I put my virginity in the paper. I was 23. I don't disagree with what I wrote then for Perspective — that I won't make a guy prove he can satisfy me sexually before we're married, that marriage is a permanent merger, that I'd rather not have the option to compare sex with my husband to sex with someone else. But in the three years since I wrote it, I've come to some deeper conclusions.

Like how the self-denial of waiting is good practice for some of the difficult but necessary parts of marriage: not always getting what you want, making unanticipated sacrifices, eradicating self-absorption.

How people who save sex for marriage have apprenticeships in patience, definitive love and fidelity.

How we are opposed to reducing a person to a means to an end, and to giving only so long as we get something out of it.

How starting a marriage without an established sexual routine will require patience and courage, compassion and creativity. And probably a sense of humor.

I am more concerned with preparedness for marriage than with preparedness for a wedding night. Which makes it no less true that a person who is a virgin until after the wedding mostly won't know what to do or expect. But do we really need to know?

In not knowing what I'm doing, I can express confidence in my spouse's commitment to me. In not knowing what to expect, I can infuse my vows with authenticity.

Whatever the guy I marry and I do, it will represent our commitment to each other. It will renew it.

And I have a hunch that won't ruin our wedding night.

*Arleen Spenceley can be reached at [aspenceley@tampabay.com](mailto:aspenceley@tampabay.com) or (727) 869-6235.*

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