

The Tangled Web

It was impossible to accept, but now the glaring evidence was undeniable. My husband of more than 25 years had been unfaithful to me for a long time.

A chill crept over me as I stared at the computer screen in disbelief. I struggled to comprehend the e-mail I had just opened. It was clearly a love letter, and its contents made it obvious the writer and addressee had been intimate over a long period of time. The incomprehensible part: This e-mail was signed by my husband—and it was not addressed to me.

The e-mail explained why, 10 days before, our lives had taken a devastating turn. We had spent a beautiful, sunny January day picnicking at a riverside park with our son. Later, after Trevor* had run off to play at a neighbor's and I had started cooking dinner, my husband, George*, appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, suitcase in hand.

The blow of his brutally calm words shocked me: "I don't love you anymore. I'm leaving."

This man—who had told me he loved me every day for 25 years, gently cradled our babies in his arms, held vigil beside my hospital bed through cancer surgeries and chemo, and even cried over the pain I'd experienced—now seemed to delight in seeing his painful words pierce my heart.

"I haven't loved you for a long time," he said, watching my reaction closely.

"What do you mean, you don't love me? How long have you not loved me?" I

cried in bewilderment.

"Why do you have to know that?" he coldly replied.

"Because you're not only destroying our future, you're destroying our past!" For all I knew, our whole marriage was disappearing down the drain.

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic," was all George would say.

THE WORLD WIDE WEB A much-loved ministry leader and family man for more than two decades, George had been decent to a fault. This was a man who shoveled widows' driveways after snowstorms, organized and led missions trips, and spent Saturday mornings happily riding our 6-year-old son around on the lawn mower. A romantic, he often took me out for coffee or dinner and always called me four or five times a day when he traveled, saying he "just wanted to hear my voice."

But this day, as I read George's cyber love-note, a different picture of my husband began to emerge. The chill of his deceptions spread from my chest to the tips of my ice-cold fingers and toes.

Why didn't I know? I chided myself. To a more sophisticated woman, George's growing preoccupation with the Internet might have provided some clues. However, since he used the Internet in his consulting business, I saw no reason to doubt his explanation.

His nightly trips downstairs to "watch a little TV until I get sleepy" might have been a red flag, but I thought his "trouble sleeping" just indicated he needed less caffeine, more exercise and maybe an appointment with our family doctor. The idea that George could be using the wee morning hours to get involved online with a woman who lived a thousand miles away never occurred to me. I trusted him implicitly.

Moreover, because I had no interest in the maze of the World Wide Web, I certainly had no idea of the tangled threads of temptation lurking there. Now, though, I was faced with a

scary reality: George had left us for an Internet lover.

For days after he left, I moved about as in a trance, barely managing to perform everyday tasks. When I wasn't trying to comfort my heartbroken, bewildered kindergartner, I was on my face before God, hanging on to Him as my only lifeline.

One afternoon when I was alone, I felt crushed to the breaking point by what was happening. Seared by the pain of broken trust, I collapsed on the living room couch, trying to block out the agony of the thought that George might have been lying to me during the entire 25 years of our marriage.

"Oh, God," I sobbed, "all those years he said he loved me—he was lying all that time!"

As clearly and unexpectedly as if a bell had rung in the room, I heard God say, "But I wasn't."

For a short time, all went absolutely calm inside me. I sat up, aware that I'd heard directly from the Lord, that He was there in the room with me, saying He loved me and meaning it. Though the absolute confidence I'd had in George had been violently ripped away, God was beginning the process of replacing it with real security—in Him.

PAINFUL REVELATIONS Soon after I found the e-mail, my pastor and I met with George to try to reconcile our marriage. Though our motives were good and our approach gentle, my pastor and I were both naive about how dramatically sexual sin—even cyber-sex—can twist a person's thinking. George repeatedly denied that there was another woman involved.

When I finally handed him a copy of the e-mail, he read it silently, his face flushing dark red.

"Oh, God, what have I done?" he cried, his face in his hands. "I betrayed you; I wrecked our marriage..." His voice trailed off into sobs, and I felt sure God was working. This was

exactly what I'd prayed for: brokenness, repentance, restoration.

George suddenly lifted his head and glared at us. "But I'm never coming back! I love her."

This yo-yo pattern of brokenness-followed-by-belligerence continued for the next six months. It was an unspeakably painful time but, as my husband pulled away, God drew me closer to Himself.

After each new, cruel revelation of George's unfaithfulness, I would settle my son to play in the family room and run upstairs, falling on my knees beside the bed. As I pleaded for God to intervene, the pain would disappear—sometimes instantly—long enough to allow me to catch my breath and absorb more strength from Him. He never failed me.

After long periods of prayer and waiting on God, I was convinced I had to remain open to forgiveness and reconciliation, something I could do only by His power. So I didn't object when George came after work to eat dinner with Trevor and me. Many times we fell back into our former pattern of long, intimate conversations in front of the fireplace after Trevor was asleep.

During these conversations, I began to understand that an e-mail sexual relationship can destroy far more than a marriage and a home; it can destroy the very people involved. Until this time, I'd felt sure that George's leaving was caused by some lack in me. Many women face this painful feeling of self-doubt, and since none of us is a perfect mate, there are always some grounds for self-accusation. My pastor, trying to help, had even counseled me to find out what the other woman was giving George that I wasn't providing.

However, what I saw during those after-dinner conversations made me suspect that the real problem was not between George and me, but between George and God. I saw a deviant side of my

husband now that unnerved me.

He swore openly and frequently used sexually crude expressions. His demeanor toward, and conversation about, other women now had sexual overtones. He admitted to frequenting bars regularly and, for the first time ever, I saw him drunk. I couldn't help remembering how, at his urging, we'd prayed fervently together in Bible college for one of his relatives who drank. Now he was the one who needed prayer.

As bad as his behavior was, even worse was what he said about God. Once an ardent student of theology, George had characterized himself when we first met as "a man in love with Jesus Christ," and that love showed in everything he did. Now, he spoke bitterly of how the church had "damaged" him. He insisted that he still believed in God but that most of what we'd been taught about Him was wrong.

I continued to learn new details about George's long-distance affair. From the other woman's jilted husband, I got a more complete picture of my husband's obsessive e-mail and phone sexual relationship.

When my pastor and I had confronted him, George had insisted that he'd met the woman only recently and that she was divorced; but according to my new information, the affair had been going on for over a year, and she was still very much married. When faced with the facts, George admitted, shamefacedly, that this new information was correct—he'd been lying yet again.

In a quarter-century of marriage, I'd come to believe George was beyond unfaithfulness, and that had always affected the way I prayed for him in the past. Now I understand that even the strongest and best people can fall, and my prayers for each member of my family reflect that possibility.

It has been 3-1/2 years since George left. He lives openly with the woman he met on the Internet, since the divorce he's

pursuing has been held up in the court system.

All our assets were in his name, so I was left with virtually no resources. Though sometimes the financial situation can look terrifying, God continues to provide the money we need, usually in ways I could never anticipate.

For a long time after my marriage was torn apart, I felt as if life was not worth living. But eventually, after I began the long, hard work of healing, joy crept back into my days. I discovered that God is the source of all joy and meaning and my real reason for living. Going on is possible because according to Romans 8:38-39, nothing—no betrayal, no hurt, however immense—can ever separate us from the faithful love of God.

Read a companion devotional.

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IF YOUR SPOUSE LEAVES YOU

In addition to praying faithfully for restoration, healing and provision, there are some practical things you can do:

Accept reality. You might have to find a job, get career training or obtain financial advice after a spouse leaves. Accepting the fact that it's happening to you is the first step toward conquering your fears.

Spend as much time as possible in prayer and the Word. Doing this will give you a balanced outlook from God's perspective. Turning the verses you read into prayers will help you express your deepest pain and sorrow. Psalms is a wonderful place to start.

Get help. Even if you feel you're handling the situation well, time spent with a friend or a qualified, godly counselor can be invaluable. If you're having thoughts of suicide, ask for help right away.

Prayer, counseling and medical intervention are available to help you remain functional. But give yourself time to grieve.

Read about it. One book I highly recommend is *An Affair of the Mind* (Tyndale). Author Laurie Hall focuses on her husband's addiction to pornography, but her keen insight applies to any family affected by sexual sin.

Don't be too quick to plug the "hole" in your life with another person. It may seem easier to circumvent the pain and loneliness by starting a new relationship, but God can teach and heal you if you concentrate on Him, giving Him time to work.

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN COPE

If you have children, you don't grieve alone when your spouse leaves you. The kids grieve, too. Here are some coping mechanisms I have found invaluable:

Include your children in prayer. When a breadwinning spouse leaves, the income level often drops dramatically. Include your children in prayer for specific needs. Nothing builds faith like seeing God answer.

Find a counselor. Children routinely struggle with anger and self-blame but may be unable or unwilling to talk about their emotions. Seek help from a godly counselor.

Involve family. More than ever before, a relative who is the same sex as the parent who left can act as a mentor, role model and friend for your child. If no extended family member lives nearby, get a pastor or friend to recommend someone.

When my husband left, I drew a stick figure labeled "Trevor"

on my son's blackboard and circled it with the names of every person who called, wrote or dropped by to say they were praying for him. This prayer circle was a constant reminder that Trevor was at the center of a large, caring family—God's family.

Teach your child to give. Giving, whether raking the neighbor's leaves or tithing on a small allowance, can keep your children from feeling poor.

Laugh. Laughing seemed impossible in the wake of George's leaving, but I went to the library and checked out funny children's books to read aloud to Trevor. Much healing took place as we laughed together.