

## INTRODUCTION

# Welcome to College

## *Meet Amy Stone: Tour Guide, Fashion Model, Straight-A Student*

*I question my faith every day.*

*—student at a Catholic college*

### THE GIRL WHO (ALMOST) HAS EVERYTHING

If you were to visit a certain small Catholic liberal arts school in a bitterly cold but beautiful corridor of the Northeast, chances are you'd run into Amy Stone.<sup>1</sup>

Amy is the kind of girl you see on the cover of college brochures. A tall, raven-haired fashion model (for real) whom you might expect to meet on the streets of New York City, Amy is dressed as if she just walked off a magazine shoot. She'd be a shoo-in for the most popular sorority at any southern school—the lucky girl who always has a gorgeous date for the football game—unless she's dating the quarterback. She could be the face of an ad for snowboards or skiwear—maybe because that's her job: showing off clothes, accessories, and a dazzling smile for the cameras.

Articulate, thoughtful, athletic, and intelligent, Amy is that person whom most of her peers long to be. Everything about her is meticulous, from the perfect manicured nails to the hip jewelry dangling from her wrists, neck, and ears. Even her posture is just right, recalling the era when women spent many an hour balancing stacks of books atop their heads. Amy exudes so much confidence as she answers my questions that I find myself wondering whether she rehearsed her responses beforehand.

Everything about Amy seems out of place—too flashy and polished—for such a tiny, out-of-the-way Catholic school. What sparked her decision to enroll? I inquired. It wasn't the Catholic affiliation that attracted her; she's Methodist. She came here because she wanted to be a big fish, and she worried that at a large public university she might be just another pretty girl. Amy carefully selected a small college that reminded her of the high school where she had really shone. Smiling wide, as she does many times during our conversation, Amy informs me that her plan is working.

"I am involved in the student ambassador program, the founder's society. . . . I am a tour guide, and next year, I'll be a student coordinator for alumni functions," says Amy, who at 19 is a sophomore. "If I had chosen to go to [a public university], I really wouldn't have had these opportunities." Amy wanted the chance "to excel and be counted." She is effusive about her choice of college. "I think every experience so far that I have had at [this school] has been positive," she answers, flashing another smile.

I love this school. I love the people. I love the professors. I love my friends that I've made here and the connections that I have made and the networking opportunities that I have had. It really has rung true what I thought [about the school as I] was coming in—a community where you walk across campus and all the students know your name and the professors call you by name.

On the surface, Amy is a star: the student everybody knows or at least knows about, the girl everyone either wishes to be or dreams of dating, the daughter that would make a parent proud, the student a professor would bend over backward to admit into an already crowded class, the ideal spokesperson for a college, the one promising prospective students: "this could be you!"

## GIRLS JUST WANT TO BE FUN (AND FIND A BOYFRIEND)

By day Amy adopts the uniform of the average college girl. She describes herself as “preppy” and wears “Ralph Lauren Polo shirts and Gap jeans or khakis” all the time and a “charm bracelet and usually [her] silver ball earrings to class.”<sup>2</sup> When it’s warm outside, she wears flip-flops and denim skirts.

Going out at night is another story. “When I go out, I like to get dressy,” Amy writes in her journal. “Usually I will wear long jeans with heels or boots and a tank top with beads or other such accessories. . . . I have sophisticated shirts and skirts and more wild and provocative attire as well.” Amy writes about one specific outfit she wore recently that made her feel especially sexy: “Last weekend I wore a black lace halter top with a ‘Very Sexy’ bra from Victoria’s Secret underneath (one of the convertible ones so no straps are visible with halter tops). The bra made my boobs huge and the shirt was low cut and black and lace. The combination of those things created a lot of attention.”

“I like to look hot when I go out,” Amy explains. “I like to be looked at.”

Amy senses that looking “hot” gives her sexual power over men on campus. Yet she also insists that dressing sexy has relatively little to do with sex. “This attention is not so people will desire me or want to hook up with me,” she writes. “It is simply to give me a confidence boost and help me feel good about myself.” As Amy understands things, dressing sexy is about *her* feeling empowered and not about pleasing guys or allowing them to dictate what she wears.

Amy studies hard and plays hard: The party usually begins in the residence hall with “pre-gaming”—drinking before heading out to the real party. As the night goes on, girls drink as much as guys because, Amy tells me, “alcohol is the catalyst of finally making [something into] an intimate relationship.” When I ask why, she explains, “Alcohol just makes it easier. You would never just walk up to someone and just start making out with them if you weren’t intoxicated. It makes your inhibitions go.”

Sometimes, Amy goes to theme parties, events where students dress up according to a particular set of stereotypes—“pimps and ho’s,” “CEOs and office ho’s,” and “golf pros and tennis ho’s,” to name the most popular. Girls wear as little as possible, sometimes nothing more than lingerie. Like many students I interviewed at Amy’s Catholic college, Amy says theme parties are a campus tradition. Current seniors

went to theme parties when they were first-years, and now it is their right and privilege to carry on the practice by holding their own. Amy often “stumbles” upon these events. Though, as she put it, she doesn’t intentionally dress the part. Amy worries about getting a reputation, since the “girls who are going to go all out and have everything hanging out and showing [at a theme party]—those are the girls who are going to be labeled as easy or a slut.” It doesn’t occur to Amy that the premise of a “ho’s” party is that *all* the girls who attend adopt the role of “whore.” By their very design, most theme parties are about sex and power, with guys in the dominant positions—the CEOs and the sports pros—and girls acting the part of the sexually submissive, sexually suggestive, sexually available, and sexually willing ho’s at their beck and call.

During our conversation, Amy’s concern about being labeled negatively comes up repeatedly. Girls have to work harder academically, she explains, since they are expected to have good grades. Girls have to look perfect. Girls have to “be the responsible ones.” Girls have to be willing to hook up because that’s the only way to get a guy, but every time they do, they risk social ruin by imperiling their reputations. Girls also have to live with an apparent contradiction: they want committed relationships, but boys do not. “Guys have it easy,” Amy says on three separate occasions. All boys worry about, she adds, are sports and partying.

“When I am out I just want to be fun,” Amy writes. “I don’t want to be one of those jealous girls or one of those girls who gets super-emotional when she drinks. I just want to be fun,” she emphasizes. “That is the image I portray and try to live by. I don’t take myself too seriously and simply want to have a good time . . . singing and dancing required.”

Amy may be campus royalty, but, as she explains in depressing detail, being a “fun” princess comes with a price. Amy has dark stories to share—stories that one wouldn’t expect to hear from the girl who seems to have everything. They are stories permeated by struggles with sex, struggles with her soul, and struggles trying to relate the two. “Being fun” has led Amy down a painful path.

## THE BIG MAN ON CAMPUS WANTED HER “V-CARD”

As it turns out, Amy doesn’t dress sexy just for herself but is trading sexiness for male attention. She has known only disappointment when it comes to sex and romance. There is one major thing that the girl who

seems to have everything is missing: a boyfriend. Amy thought college would be all about falling in love with the guy she'd be with forever. But she in fact has never even had a boyfriend.

"You hear about my parents' generation, who met the loves of their life in college, who had this great whirlwind relationship and decidè[d] to get married and have kids," Amy says wistfully. "Then I got here, and I said, 'Oh my God, it's totally not like that at all.' People don't generally want to have relationships." Almost everybody is single, Amy explains, especially the first-year students and sophomores.<sup>3</sup> "I remember as a freshman... I was out at a party with this guy, and I thought he was really into me," she says with some sadness:

We were at a dance party and we were kissing, and someone came up to me and told me he had a girlfriend at a different school. I was blind-sided. It took a little bit of figuring out my freshman year that this is how a lot of people are. They'll either have a girlfriend at another place and all they're interested in is hooking up, or they will not have a girlfriend at all and just want one-night stands.

During most of our interview, Amy maintains the same poised manner she had when she first walked into the room. Yet once our conversation turns to Amy's personal sexual history, her composure falters. Amy really wants to find a boyfriend, someone who will love her. She's tried everything she knows: hooking up, being friends with benefits, playing hard to get. Nothing has worked. Most of her efforts have produced only heartache. Amy is still a virgin, she explains, though she has performed oral sex on a number of boys. But what worries Amy and makes her ashamed is not her experience, but her *in*experience.

Being a virgin—even a popular, beautiful one—is difficult: "It puts a mark on your head," Amy says. Amy's virgin status made her the subject of a bet among members of the most popular male sports team on campus: Who would be the first to persuade Amy to have sex?

Not long before our interview, Amy was "sort of with someone," she begins, but they "weren't calling each other boyfriend and girlfriend." This "someone" was the star of the varsity soccer team—as big a man on campus as a small liberal arts college can boast. Amy admits she was drawn to him because he was an athlete. "We were hooking up," Amy says, eyes darting to the ground. "We didn't have sex, although that was just because I told him that I didn't want to." They were "together" every weekend for a month and a half before it ended. "I found out from guys on his soccer team that his intention was to have sex with me,

and that was basically why he was with me.” The notorious virgin-fashion model on campus was to be a notch on this soccer star’s belt, and his teammates were cheering him on, betting on the day he would finally persuade Amy to give in.

“I was devastated,” Amy confesses. She felt both betrayed and humiliated to learn that her sexual innocence had become a topic of locker room conversation:

Our third time hooking up, we came very close to having sex. I told him that we weren’t going to have sex . . . and he said OK. So afterwards we were just cuddling and whatnot, and he asked me if I was a virgin. I remember we were lying in the spooning position, and I didn’t feel like we should be having this conversation in the spooning position. We needed to be face to face. So I turned around, and I looked at him right in the eye, and I said, “This is between you and me, promise me this won’t be locker room talk.” Those were my exact words. He said, “Of course.” I told him that, yes, I was a virgin. Then for half an hour we talked about the reasons I was a virgin, how I wanted my first time to be, the reason I was saving it for something special. And he was so respectful and told me that, yes, of course your first time should be special, I really respect you for waiting this long. . . . So I didn’t think anything of it. I believed that he wouldn’t talk about it.

Luckily, Amy explains, one of the other soccer players felt bad for her. He told Amy how his teammate was boasting that he was going to “take her v-card.” By then, the soccer star and Amy had already hooked up many times—he was the first person on whom she performed oral sex.

Amy’s bad experiences did not stop there. In her journal, Amy recounts a regretful encounter with a different guy on campus. “[One] night that I was very drunk,” she writes:

I threw up at a party. The room was spinning and I needed to go to bed. Friends at the party had the guy I was with at the time take me back. . . . When we went to bed we began to hook up and I obviously was not in the state to be doing so. The next thing I know I was giving him oral sex. He was basically masturbating into my mouth because I was too drunk to do anything more than hold my mouth there.

Many would consider this a sexual assault, but Amy doesn’t go that far. Several other women I interviewed spoke of instances where they did not consent to sexual acts, yet the guys they were with went ahead

anyway. Amy simply reports that it was “disrespectful of him to still want oral sex even though I was that drunk.”

“In that instance we were not connecting and I was simply the means for him to get off,” she writes. “I never confronted him about it,” she adds, “but after that I knew he was not who I thought he was.”

Amy expresses a consuming frustration when it comes to sex and romance, and begins to seem less like a princess and more like the average college woman I met—vulnerable, burned by at least one guy and who, behind closed doors, admits to regret, shame, and dismay about some of her past experiences. Amy also shares an inability to find her heart’s desire: a real boyfriend, one who loved and respected her, and who would admit to their relationship in public by doing something as simple as asking her on a date or holding her hand while walking across campus. Amy can win the admiration of the entire campus in all sorts of ways, but she can’t win at love. Despite her pull on the social scene, Amy is powerless to change her peers’ expectations about dating and sex, so she goes with the crowd while at the same time clinging to the hope that she’ll find one good guy somewhere.

Amy is unsure whether she will save herself for marriage. She used to think she would be a virgin on her wedding day, but now she just hopes that her first time won’t be something she regrets—that it will happen with someone who at least respects her, even if he doesn’t love her. Her experience with the soccer player has made her leery about trusting guys. Sometimes she even lies about the fact that she is still a virgin. “I mean,” she says, “if [the soccer player] was talking about wanting to take my v-card, you never know who else is thinking that. If that is for some bizarre reason a priority for guys to take someone’s virginity, [then] knowing that I’m a virgin is not necessarily going to be a good thing.”

Amy has learned several lessons so far from her on-campus sexual experiences: that being a virgin makes her a target and that she has to be careful who knows about her virginity. Amy feels she “escaped” sexual ruin, but she feels humiliated that word is out on campus: the fashion model is a virgin. She is dismayed that, even at a small school where people seem so friendly and she’s experienced so much success, her body is a “hot commodity” and her virginity a coveted “prize.” Who knew that a Catholic campus would prove to be a place where sexual inexperience was something either to hide or to get rid of as quickly as possible? Where you could see members of that same soccer team at church on Sunday mornings, as if religion and sex, mass and morality, had nothing to do with each other?

## SEXUAL ACTIVITY, WHO'S REALLY DOING IT, AND THE VIRGIN GAP

As table 7.2 indicates, at spiritual colleges, almost three-quarters (74%) of students report that they have been sexually active in some way. The percentages of sexually active men and women are almost identical.

Some people may find these figures surprisingly high. I suspect, however, that many college students will find them surprisingly low, since most of them assume that just about everybody is having sex. When you split the data by school year, however, the picture becomes

TABLE 7.2 Sexual Activity at Non-Evangelical Colleges (Overall and by Gender)

	Women*	Men**	Total***
Students who answered yes, they consider themselves virgins	232/733 (31.7%)	105/311 (33.8%)	342/1,050 (32.6%)
Students who answered no, they do not consider themselves virgins	501/733 (68.3%)	206/311 (66.2%)	708/1,050 (67.4%)
Students who answered no, they have never experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex	165/733 (22.5%)	80/312 (25.6%)	356/1,346 (26.4%)
Students who answered yes, they have experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex	568/733 (77.5%)	232/312 (74.4%)	990/1,346 (73.6%)

\*This column includes students who answered both the question in the left-hand column and also indicated their gender as female and did not also affiliate with one of the two evangelical schools listed at the end of the survey.

\*\*This column includes students who answered both the question in the left-hand column and also indicated their gender as male and did not also affiliate with one of the two evangelical schools listed at the end of the survey.

\*\*\*This column includes all students who answered the questions in the left-hand column but who did not also affiliate with one of the two evangelical schools listed at the end of the survey.

TABLE 7.3 Sexual Activity at Non-Evangelical Colleges (by School Type)

	Catholic Schools*	Private-Secular Schools*	Public School*
Students who answered yes, they consider themselves virgins	175/472 (37.1%)	111/354 (31.4%)	35/188 (18.6%)
Students who answered no, they do not consider themselves virgins	297/472 (62.9%)	243/354 (68.6%)	153/188 (81.4%)
Students who answered no, they have never experienced oral, anal, and/ or vaginal sex	127/472 (26.9%)	74/355 (20.8%)	28/188 (14.9%)
Students who answered yes, they have experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex	345/472 (73.1%)	281/355 (79.2%)	160/188 (85.1%)

*\*These columns include all students who answered the questions in the left-hand column and who also indicated school affiliation with one of the two Catholic schools, or one of the two private-secular schools, or the public school at the end of the survey.*

more nuanced, with 46% of first-year students claiming virginity, 33% of sophomores, 23% of juniors, and 21% of seniors.<sup>19</sup>

If you break down these data by institution type, the picture changes a bit, with the percentages of students who say they are virgins ranging widely: 37.1% at Catholic schools, 31.4% at nonreligious private schools, and 18.6% at public universities. This shows that perhaps religious affiliation *does* matter to a degree. Likewise, the number of students who answered yes, they have experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex varies widely among school types, with 85% of students at public universities reporting that they have been sexually active in one or more of these ways; the figure falls to 79% at nonreligious private schools and to 73% at Catholic colleges.

Which brings me to the virgin gap.

It is common knowledge today that teens and young adults are legalistic about "how far" they can go and "still remain virgins."<sup>20</sup> This is especially true for those with strong religious affiliations, evangelical

TABLE 7.4 Sexually Active Students (by School Type)

	Evangelical Schools	Catholic Schools	Private-Secular Schools	Public School
Students who answered yes, they consider themselves virgins	481/608 (79.1%)	175/472 (37.1%)	111/354 (31.4%)	35/188 (18.6%)
Students who answered no, they do not consider themselves virgins	127/608 (20.9%)	297/472 (62.9%)	243/354 (68.6%)	153/188 (81.4%)
Students who answered no, they have never experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex	394/609 (64.7%)	127/472 (26.9%)	74/355 (20.8%)	28/188 (14.9%)
Students who answered yes, they have experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex	215/609 (35.3%)	345/472 (73.1%)	281/355 (79.2%)	160/188 (85.1%)

*Each column includes all students who answered the questions in the left-hand column and who also indicated school affiliation with one of the two evangelical schools, or one of the two Catholic schools, or one of the two private-secular schools, or the public school listed at the end of the survey.*

youth in particular. The figures above seem to confirm that a number of students who have had oral, anal, or vaginal sex still consider themselves to be virgins. Some students simply do not consider oral or anal sex to be “real” sex—creating what I call the “virgin gap.”<sup>21</sup>

For example, at the public school, 85% of students claim to have experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex, while only 81% claim they are no longer virgins—leaving a 4% gap. This gap increases to about 10% at both nonreligious private and Catholic schools, implying that, at these institutions, being a virgin may be a more valuable claim than at public schools. The virgin gap is highest at the evangelical schools (14%).

Most telling about these data at the spiritual colleges, however, is the huge discrepancy they point to between sexual realities and romantic ideals. The overwhelming majority of students I interviewed—79% if you factor in those who included kissing in their ideal romantic encounter—held to a *chaste* view of romance. Most students are having sex at some point during the college experience. But they also long for romance without sex. How satisfied are students with their sexual experiences? Is it possible that most of the sex that students are having is “nonromantic” in nature? And if this is true, *why* is this sex nonromantic? Student descriptions of romance rely heavily on communication and emotional connection. But the sex they are having appears to be lacking in both. Why are most students failing when it comes to integrating open communication and emotion into the realm of their sexual experience? Where does this divide between romance and sex come from? How might students begin to bridge this gap—presuming they’d like to?

The gap between romantic ideals and sexual reality is narrower on evangelical campuses, and sexual activity is far less typical overall. At the evangelical colleges I visited, 35% of students said that they had experienced oral, anal, or vaginal sex, far below the 77% who said yes to the same question at non-evangelical schools. These lower levels of sexual activity may not have any effect on whether evangelical students are *satisfied* with their sexual experiences, but they seem to indicate an increased likelihood that, when it comes to romance and dating, the experiences these students are having are more likely to be chaste—and therefore more likely to feel romantic.<sup>22</sup>

If indeed there is a vast distance between romance and sex at the spiritual colleges—much more so than at the evangelical ones—then what aspects of campus culture contribute to this divide? What other social structures contribute to such an emotionally and romantically unfulfilling climate? How do religion and spirituality affect students’ sexual and romantic experiences? Or, in the end, do they not matter at all?

## EIGHT

# God vs. My Boyfriend

*I'm supposed to be a great Christian guy and I have sexual feelings,  
and with God I feel guilty, and I ask God to forgive me,  
and I feel that I'm going to run out of grace.*

*—student at an evangelical university*

## THE RARE SEXUAL SAGE: CARA WALKER

“If you’ve already had sex, there are ways to repackage your virginity,” Cara Walker tells me matter-of-factly, as if people “repackage” their sexual histories all the time.

Cara Walker and I are chatting like old friends. She speaks with a slow, southern drawl, rounding out her vowels, keeping the pace of our conversation leisurely, as if we have all the time in the world. She wears her thick, light-brown hair with blonde highlights in an old-fashioned flip, shoulder length, making her seem older than her 20 years. A sophomore at an evangelical university, Cara comes from a missionary family that lived in Africa for 10 years, bouncing from one country to another. She went to church regularly, prayed at home, did Bible study and youth group—the standard evangelical upbringing. At college, Cara has continued these activities. She “feels tired” if she doesn’t go to church on Sunday. Her friends are “really involved” Christians, too. They pray together, go to services together, and even do yoga

together—their “meditation time.” Cara calls herself religious—which is “the stuff that you do when you’re Christian, you know, like going to church.” She also calls herself spiritual, which has to do with her “personal relationship with God” and how “she lives her life day to day.”

So far, Cara sounds average. When we get to questions about sex I realize Cara is different.

Cara began having sex when she was 18. It was only for a summer—a full year before college—and it was with one guy. After the relationship ended but before she got to college, she tells me, she felt caught between feeling OK about what she had done and regretting it. “I got really, really close to him, and he said he loved me,” she explains:

I never said I loved him, and it did get really serious, and he wanted to continue dating, but I didn’t want that. I think it was a positive experience, but I think it’s taken a long time for me to heal from it. I believe that when you have sex with someone, you get bound to them spiritually, and there are a lot of emotional things that come along with that. For the most part, I don’t regret it because I know it happened for a reason, but in a way I *do* regret it. But I don’t *let* myself regret it. I just try to look on the positive side and see how I’ve grown from it.

*Cara is different from her evangelical peers. Not because she had sex: I interviewed a number of evangelical students who had sex, and about 35% of those who took the online survey claimed to be sexually active. What sets Cara apart is that she does not look back on having sex as an entirely negative experience, as something that was simply “sinful.” She recognizes elements of this sexual relationship as positive: she and her boyfriend were emotionally connected, he loved her, and, from the sound of it, she found sex enjoyable. Cara’s effort to see “how she’s grown from it” distinguishes her from her peers at evangelical institutions. Except for Emily Holland, who is married, the evangelical students I interviewed who had sex were torn up about it, hating themselves for falling into it and hating sex because they thought it a wrong thing to do outside of marriage.*

But then, Cara does talk a lot about regret—about feeling some regret yet trying to ward it off. And no wonder, since her decision to have sex almost destroyed her faith: Cara finds it difficult to live with the fact that she is no longer pure—that she has given away her physical virginity to someone who is not her husband—though I soon learn that, from Cara’s perspective, it’s possible to redeem a person’s spiritual purity.

"Any physical sexual activity apart from kissing can just kind of tear away at your purity and spirituality as a virgin," Cara explains. "A virgin who has never done anything—I think you're on a completely different level." But Cara cannot aspire to this level of purity anymore. "I definitely felt like I was running from God, trying to hide what I was doing," she says, recalling the summer she first had sex. "It took me a long time to get back to a relationship with God."

"How long?" I ask.

"A year and a half," she answers. What she did during that time was repackage her virginity, at least in spiritual terms, a process that restored her sense of religious and personal self-worth. "I think it means to make a commitment to not have sex again," Cara explains further. "You can't take back what you did, but you can restore your spiritual virginity, I think. I think it's not a complete loss: God does forgive you, and it is forgotten. I don't think you ever forget about it, but you are given a second chance."

According to Cara, repackaging your virginity is well worth the time and effort. Becoming a "born-again virgin," as this task is more popularly known, or achieving a "secondary virginity," was not instantaneous for Cara. It is not as if she woke up one day and vowed not to have sex again until marriage—as if simply saying, "OK, I reclaim myself a virgin" would make it so. You can never restore your physical virginity either, Cara says—once that's gone, *it's gone*. Some critics reduce secondary virginity or born-again virginity to this sort of cheap grace, making the concept itself laughable to outsiders.<sup>1</sup> But whatever grace Cara found during this long and arduous process was anything but cheap. Cara worked hard during that year and a half to reclaim her relationship with God and to regain her "spiritual virginity." During this period, she experienced lots of doubt, terrible regret, and deep alienation from God. At times, she believed that God would never forgive her for having sex and that she would never forgive herself. This period *began* with a vow to not have sex again outside of marriage, but it also entailed many hours in personal prayer and working closely with a mentor—a young married woman whom Cara found through a church, and the only person other than her boyfriend who knew initially that Cara had had sex. Even with a mentor, however, Cara sometimes felt alone and abandoned. "Mainly I did it myself—I didn't really talk to any adults," aside from the mentor, she says. But in the end, she was able to restore her spiritual virginity.

"It took me about another half a year to just forgive myself," she says. "I did wonder, I don't know, 'What if God's going to punish me

for it? What if the guy I start dating doesn't want me because I'm not a virgin?' It took me a while to believe in my heart that I could start over."

Cara is now confident not only that God has forgiven her, but also that her past experience was not a complete loss. God has given her a second chance, and part of her responsibility is to use her sexual history to help friends who are desperately seeking understanding and advice about sex—in both its physical and its spiritual dimensions. Cara still has regrets about her summer before college, but for the most part she believes that "it happened for a reason"—that there was a higher spiritual purpose behind her sexual experiences.

When Cara entered college as a first-year student, she worried that no one else would be like her. Everyone else would be "better Christians" because they would still be virgins. But Cara eventually learned that her roommate had the exact same worry. When Cara told her roommate what happened in high school, her roommate jokingly exclaimed, "Hallelujah," at which point she confessed to Cara that she wasn't a virgin, either. As Cara made more friends, she found out that she was not alone. She also discovered that her openness about her sexual history and newfound confidence as a born-again virgin gave her an important role among her many girlfriends. She doesn't tell just anybody about her sexual past, since "you don't want to come across as [bad] because then you won't get the right husband, and once you get a reputation, you have it until you graduate." But the more Cara spoke about her sexual past to friends she felt she could trust, the more she realized that her friends did still respect her. In fact, she explains with pride, her past, and her willingness to talk honestly about it, gives her an important and unique standing among her peers.

Cara has become something of a sexual sage. Her friends respect her for being forthcoming about her sexual history. "They respect the fact that I can help them through things, and I know what I'm talking about," she says. "I've helped a lot of girls reset their morals and helped them realize that they can move on from these kinds of things."

"Reset their morals"? I ask Cara what she means by this.

"If my friend's dating, and she's getting really physical with a guy and she wants to talk to me about it," she says,

I don't have to be afraid to tell her, "You need to stop doing that because it's going to get too far," because I've had that experience. It's not like I'm talking down to her, because I've done it too, so I can talk to her because of that experience, and I can help her. And my friends,

because they know that I can relate to that and that I've been through it, they listen to me more than I think they'd listen to someone completely pure who'd never experienced anything like that before.

One reason Cara's friends flock to her for advice is that many of her peers do not "feel comfortable" discussing sex with their professors, administrators, and ministers. According to Cara, this is a big problem. She says lots of students are having sex, but it is nearly as taboo to admit this as it is to do it. People worry that the social repercussions will be disastrous if others find out.

It isn't surprising that girlfriends would rely on each other for advice about sex. What's unique in Cara's case is how her sexual experience gives her a special kind of moral authority which she uses to guide her friends through the thicket of sexuality. Almost without exception, the evangelical students I interviewed expressed a belief—even a fear—that they would lose status among their friends and adult mentors if they should stumble sexually. Moral authority resides in those who are "pure." It seemed never to occur to other students who have had sex that being open about their experiences could give them a special and positive role in their community.

"I didn't *try* to take on the role," Cara tells me about her standing as a kind of Dr. Ruth for evangelical girls,

but I think once they found out, now if they have a question, they'll come and ask me, and I know it's because they feel comfortable telling me because I've opened up and told them about my past. I feel like I've got to make the best of the situation, and I mean, I feel like it happened to me for a reason, and one of the reasons is that now I can help girls understand what it feels like.

Opening up to others about her sexual past has also strengthened Cara's relationship with God as she acts as adviser and moral authority among her peers. The purpose behind all this—God's purpose, according to Cara—was to repackage not only her virginity but also herself, to provide her with an opportunity to step up and own her sexual past for the benefit of others.

At evangelical colleges, when someone's acknowledgment of past sexual behavior is welcomed (rather than rejected or judged harshly), it liberates not only that person but others, empowering them to be authentic and open about who they are as sexual beings. In Cara's case, the fact that talking about her sexual history elicited a "Hallelujah" from her roommate is telling; it helped enable her to be authentic and genuine among friends.

As Cara and I get to the end of our interview, I notice that she is wearing a promise ring. I know that she has restored her virginity spiritually, but still it surprises me to see her wearing this sign of purity.

"My Dad took me out to dinner [during] my sophomore year of high school and bought me a diamond ring, and it was a purity ring," she says, placing her hand on the table and shifting it so the stone sparkles in the light. "I obviously broke that pledge. But since then, I try to remember to wear it. I've retaken that pledge. I'm not going to have sex again until I'm married. I know that I can do it."

## TWO TYPES OF STUDENT, ONE TYPE OF DILEMMA

Cara is one of the few students who was able to tell me a story about how she reconciled her sexual and religious lives. This is a tricky task for any young single person, not only for students at evangelical colleges. Cara expressed the kind of pride about her spiritual path that I saw in Emily Holland. But she stands out because she found a way to integrate sexuality and spirituality—sex and the soul—outside the traditional boundaries of marriage. Cara even found a way for her sexual past to *enhance* her spiritual life and her role in her religious community.

Some students do not even try to reconcile their sexual lives with their faith lives because they do not believe it is possible to do so within traditional organized religion. Others, like Amy Stone, seek meaning in and justification for their sexual activities in the murky sphere of the spiritual. None of these students is quite like Cara, however. Cara has managed to pull off what to most college students is an improbable, even a heroic, feat. She has recognized herself as a sexual being with a sexual past and future, without renouncing her faith. And she has recognized herself as a religious being, with a religious past and future, without renouncing her sexuality.

With the exception of Emily, who is already married, these students, evangelical and otherwise, are all sexually mature—at least physically—but they do not occupy the one religiously sanctioned space for sex, namely, marriage. Here again, students can be split into evangelicals and everyone else. As far as attitudes about how religion and sex go together (or don't), students at Catholic colleges share with their non-religious private and public school peers the conviction that faith is faith and sex is sex and never the twain shall meet; the idea of allowing religious beliefs to affect one's sex life is silly if not laughable.