

# LOVING AN UNFAITHFUL MAN

Should you forgive and forget?



**E**ight months ago, the man my friend Emily has lived with for the past six years became involved with another woman. He then behaved in such a way as to make his involvement apparent to Emily. He extended a business trip to include an unexplained weekend away from home, behavior uncustomary enough to cause Emily to guess the meaning of his absence. Considering the repercussions, his actions were not only uncustomary, but unfathomable. Did he *want* Emily to know about his affair? And if so, was it because he wanted her to acquiesce to it, to wait it out, or because he wanted to end their relationship? Emily found that her partner was as confused about his motives as she was. He was sure of only one thing, that he didn't want Emily to leave him.

That she did not leave him, that she did wait it out, shouldn't be taken as an accurate measure of her pain or rage. She had a full measure of both. Throughout the five months of his affair, she made it clear to her partner that the situation was intolerable to her, and that her love for him didn't mean she could accept his behavior. For his part, her partner claimed to love Emily, to want to hold on to their life together, and to be in the process of ending his other attachment. For a while this kept Emily from walking out the front door, although she found it impossible to share a life, or a bed, with him. After some time though, even sharing the same roof became intolerable. One day she announced that it was time they sorted out their possessions and decided who got the apartment. At that point, it finally became blindingly clear to her partner what

he was risking. He broke off his love affair.

Now he's made it plain that he wants Emily to remain in the relationship and to go on with their life together. She would like to be able to do that, but she finds herself wary, wounded and still enraged. She's not sure if she wants to stay with him, if she *should* stay with him, or even if she *can*.

Everyone else thinks they know what she should do. Her friends have told her to "leave the bum," and have accused her of masochism for not doing so with alacrity. He's violated the relationship, they tell her, which is certainly true. He's betrayed her, they say, which is also true.

Emily knows all of this, but she knows other things, too—intimate, valuable things about their life together. These she finds difficult to disregard, and harder still to discard. The bathwater must go, of course, but there's also the question of the baby.

She's *not* a masochist. She's always fought hard for her rights, both on the job, as a lawyer in a mostly male law firm, and in her social relationships. The connection between her and her lover, far from being masochistic in nature, has always seemed to be one of mutual support and shared responsibility. Until recently, their life together had proved eminently satisfying to her. The apartment they've furnished together, mostly from shared auction triumphs, the weekend cottage they've slaved to make over, the child they've talked about having once their careers are securely on track, all attest to the substantiality of their connection.

Moreover, despite his recent behavior, her partner *isn't* a bum. He's been a (Continued)

by Bette-Jane Raphael

loving partner for a long time, generous in both emotional and material ways. (When Emily had her appendix out in an emergency operation two years ago, he practically slept at the hospital, and he took total care of her and their apartment while she recuperated. When she was having a particularly hard time at her job, he told her not to be afraid to quit, that he would handle their bills for as long as it took her to relocate.) He's no saint, of course. (He seems congenitally incapable of being on time, and he has a streak of perfectionism that often makes him short with other people's failings, Emily's included.)

All in all, their relationship has not been unlike those of a lot of women and their partners. Emily's partner claims he has never been unfaithful to her before, and she believes him and is wary of confusing his unfaithfulness with a pathology of unfaithful behavior.

Despite all of this, maybe I too might advise Emily to "leave the bum," if it weren't for the fact that I understand her ambivalence only too well. I once had to make a similar decision, and I learned then that it was a decision no outsider could make for me. At the time, I'd just learned what I would willingly have lived my entire life without learning: That when you are betrayed by the person with whom you have your most intimate relationship, the emotional devastation is keen and many-layered. It taps into every

vulnerable area of your psyche, and leaves you unsteady, unsure, at the mercy of your darkest self-doubts and your most terrifying fears and rages. This is a difficult experience to come away from with feelings of trust, forgiveness and love.

When those are the very feelings that your partner, penitent, wants you to entertain, your dilemma is complete. Deciding whether or not to go on with your life together is one of the toughest decisions you will ever be called upon to make.

It is also one of the most personal. Some women can forgive a six-month love affair, while others find it impossible to forgive a one-night stand, and *you're* the only one who knows on which side of the line you fall. You're also the only one who can make an accurate assessment of your partner's behavior and character, and predict from that the nature of your future together.

I'm reminded of my friend Janice, who confided to me a couple of years ago that her husband had had a brief affair with a woman he'd met at a professional conference. He'd seemed to want Janice to find out about his involvement. (At least she saw no other way to explain why a man as obsessively tidy as her husband would leave an American Express hotel receipt lying on the bedroom floor.) Unlike Emily's partner, however, he ended the affair immediately after Janice confronted him. Later, she explained her ability to go on in the relationship this

way: "I saw a man who was not only sorry he'd hurt me, but who was clearly grateful that he hadn't lost me—and who understood he'd behaved in a way that had nearly cost him what he valued most in the world. I'd be an idiot to walk out on someone who'd so obviously learned from what he himself saw as a mistake."

Both my friends' experiences seem to support the contention that if you find out about a partner's infidelity, the chances are that he *wanted* you to find out about it—although he may deny that desire to both you and himself. In some instances, it may even be that the affair itself is less important than the reason it was conducted, and the reason your partner "helped" you discover it. A man (or a woman) can have an affair—and make that affair evident to his partner—for a variety of reasons: because he is bored or wants out of the relationship, or because he wants to hurt his partner or retaliate against her for some harbored resentment. (I have a writer friend who firmly believes that her husband—now her ex-husband—had an affair because he was jealous that she was publishing her first book. "He wanted to get even with me for my success," is her open-eyed assessment of his behavior.) Or, his reasons for starting the affair may have little to do with what is going on in the relationship, and his letting his partner find out about it may mean that he *wants* her to help him untangle himself from the involve-



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ment. (Janice believes this was the case with her husband, who ended his affair with what Janice could have sworn were feelings of relief.)

It's vitally important that you and your partner discover the reasons for his behavior, because the nature of those reasons should determine the nature of your reaction. You might feel it's a calculated but acceptable risk to remain with someone who has an affair in a moment of weakness and self-doubt, and who then feels too unhappy and guilty to go on with it. On the other hand, you may want to walk out on a man who, when he is angry at you, will have an affair because—consciously or not—he wants to hurt you.

The friends who have counseled Emily to "leave the bum" believe it is cowardly to stay in a relationship with someone who has betrayed you. And it is cowardly to stay with a man who hurts you simply because you are scared of making a new life for yourself. But sometimes walking out can be easier than staying in the relationship and dealing honestly with all of the issues raised by your partner's infidelity. The point, finally, isn't whether you walk out or not, but whether you make the choice out of fear or out of a sense of what is right for you.

Certainly, if you want out of a relationship, a partner's infidelity gives you the perfect excuse to leave. But it also gives you the chance to evaluate how much the rela-

tionship means to you.

Even if it means a great deal, however, it takes more than the usual amount of commitment to come back for another round after you've had the wind knocked out of you. Even if you can forgive, *forgetting* is another matter. Going on together means living with a daily reminder of your pain, and fighting down a daily dose of suspicion. It means learning to trust all over again.

That's not an easy job for most of us, and for some of us it's unthinkable. I know one woman whose lover had an affair with one of her friends. Although she didn't find out about it until it was over—her "friend" confessed to her over brunch one afternoon—and although her boyfriend wanted her to remain in their relationship, she found it impossible to stay with him. "I really tried," she says. "But every time we started to get close an alarm would go off inside me, warning me not to let myself become vulnerable again. I finally had to leave him. It wasn't a matter of choice; I *couldn't* stay."

Being able to stay may mean finding ways to adjust the relationship in order to make it comfortable enough for you to remain in it. I know a woman who lived with a man for nearly seven years, at which point he had an affair. Afterward, when he wanted them to go on together, she found that she could no longer take their relationship on faith alone. The only way she could remain with him would be if they got married. She still loved

him, but she needed a substantive act of commitment before she could feel trustful enough to stay. Another woman decided to go on with her partner after he suggested that they see a couple therapist together. "I felt his willingness to put that much effort into our relationship proved it meant a great deal to him," she says. "Once I believed that, I was able to trust him again."

Choosing to stay in or leave the relationship at this point is not a question of love. Whether you still love your partner is less relevant to your decision than whether you feel comfortable putting your happiness in his hands again. I loved the man with whom I eventually decided I could not remain. For this man, I believed, infidelity was pathological. His pattern was one of intimacy followed by flight, in the form of an affair. I realized that choosing to make a life with him would mean choosing to live through one painful episode after another.

I didn't decide to leave him in order to make him change. We can't change people; they have to change themselves. Every woman who has to decide whether or not to stay with a man who's been unfaithful must understand that fact, and not base her decision on what she thinks its effect will be on her partner. She shouldn't leave in order to punish him, or bring him to his senses, any more than she should stay simply because she still loves him. One choice is based on a

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## AN UNFAITHFUL MAN Continued

useless brand of manipulation, the other on a treacherous sort of romanticism. Both motives augur regret down the line.

Usually what we are asked to do by a partner who strays is forgive behavior we deplore. And I do believe that forgiveness is a legitimate part of love, and that trust is a repairable commodity. But it requires the right conditions to heal—and the right man. It's impossible to rebuild trust when you are dealing with a man who really doesn't understand his own motivations, or who blames his behavior on others—on you, for instance. On the other hand, a man who exhibits the ability to understand his actions and emotions is someone you may feel comfortable reinvesting your life in, especially if he seems able to assess his capacity for, and his feelings about, being a steadfast partner in the future.

Even when the right conditions are present, however, healing can take time. Perhaps that's why one woman I know chose to take some time alone before deciding whether to go on with the husband who had betrayed her. She sublet an apartment for six months, and lived her life as if she were single. She and her husband talked often, though, and when she eventually decided to return to him, it was with the added benefit of knowing she wasn't returning out of a fear of being on her own.

I think I had this woman in mind when, finally, I advised Emily to take her time in deciding whether to leave her relationship—enough time to gather the evidence of her own heart as well as that of her lover's. I'd advise any woman to take that time, every bit that she needs, before making such a decision. ■

*Bette-Jane Raphael writes often about human relationships.*

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