

Up close and personal with Shannon Ethridge

Tell me a little bit about your background?

Although I grew up in the church, I lived a double life. After being sexually abused, I became a sexually active teen and sadly, lost count of how many partners I'd had. Then I married a 26-year old virgin, Greg, who has spent the past 20 years of marriage loving me unconditionally, lifting me up and encouraging me to be the woman God made me to be.

You've written a number of books on sexual relationships, where did the inspiration come from? In addition to everything my husband has modelled for me about being a person of sexual and emotional integrity, I was also inspired by the years I spent in a funeral home as a mortician. I was shocked by how many people I was embalming who either died of AIDS, or committed suicide because of an HIV-positive diagnosis, and I knew it was only by God's grace that I hadn't wound up on that embalming table myself. I wanted to teach other young people to avoid the sexual pitfalls I'd blindly wandered into as a teen.

Until I read 'Every Woman's Battle' I always thought of unfaithfulness as somebody having a physical relationship with someone other than their husband. Yet in your book you open up a whole arena as to how women can be unfaithful without getting physical outside of their marriage. Where did your idea of sexual and emotional integrity come from?

I knew that for me, I didn't have to become physical with another man to feel as if my marriage was in great jeopardy. My extramarital emotional entanglements were all it took to tempt me into accusing my husband of "not meeting my emotional needs," which made me want to leave him in pursuit of the "love" I felt entitled to. It was a scary season for both of us.

If you could give one piece of advice to a girl about to get married what would it be? Putting a wedding band on your finger doesn't change anything except your last name. If you've had sexual or emotional integrity issues in the past, put on your big-girl panties and deal with them now before you drag them into your marriage relationship!

What about advice to the woman who has been married for many years, whose honeymoon period is well and truly over? Our bodies are not designed to maintain those revved-up emotional states that come with a new relationship. When the "intensity" wears off, that's when genuine "intimacy" begins, or "in-to-me-see" as I describe it. The relationship has to evolve from "passionate love" to "companionate love" or else it never fully matures. Think of it like a campfire. It's really hottest AFTER the big flames die down and the embers begin to glow brightly.

As I read Every Woman's Battle I realised what a real struggle it must be for the single Christian woman to maintain sexual and emotional integrity, particularly in a society where it is alien for a woman to remain a virgin until she is married. What words of hope and encouragement can you give to those who are facing some difficult decisions when it comes to intimate relationships? It's easy for a woman to cave into pressures or temptations thinking that marriage is going to be so far into the future, but the reality is that if she holds that card firmly in her hand, he's more likely to want to seal the deal faster than if she folds. Translation: men may want to fool around with any woman who'll let them, but they want to marry the ones with self-control. Although it's a pathetic analogy in light of our human value, there's a lot of validity to what our moms told us: A man isn't motivated to buy the cow if you give him the milk for free.

What do you say to the woman who is so emotionally scarred from inappropriate sexual experiences in the past that they feel they can never wipe the slate clean? It's not up to us to wipe our own slate clean. We can't. But God can. In fact, He already did. You don't have to wait for some special miracle to set you free. The miracle has already happened – Christ's death on a cross. His blood was more than sufficient to cleanse us completely. Keeping the scarlet letter on our sweater is a sad choice in light of how Christ died to remove it. Let's receive this free gift of mercy and move on!

Now, let's talk about your new book 'The Sexually Confident Wife'! Firstly, how did you come up the idea for this book? *As I was writing the Every Woman's Battle series, particularly Every Woman's Marriage, I was frustrated by how much I wanted to say about sexual intimacy in marriage but knew it wouldn't fly. Christian publishers weren't ready for that kind of gut-level honesty and candidness. Then God sweetly said, "It's not just Christian women who deserve to be sexually confident. Write this message to the whole world, and Christians who are ready for it will pick it up as well."* Random House jumped at the idea. A few Christians have taken offense my "mainstream" approach, but the vast majority are shouting, "Hallelujah! It's about time a Christian spoke out about this!" To me, it's all about being a light in the darkness, which is what Christ called us to do.

I applaud you for your profound honesty, which at times had me laughing out loud and at others times blushing with embarrassment; you certainly pull no punches. I have to say some of your tips for spicing up your sex life with your husband left me feeling somewhat intimidated, not to mention very boring! Having said that I'm sure I'm not the only reader who wasn't chomping at the bit to enrol for lap dancing lessons on completion of the book (I'm more likely to enrol for tap dancing lessons!). Do you really think the average woman would be up for trying some of your suggestions?

Certainly not all suggestions are for all women. You have to approach this book "a la carte" style. Chew up the meat, spit out the bones. Be stretched to get out of any sexual rut you're in, but don't stretch yourself so far out of your comfort zone that you're trying to be someone you're not. It's all about becoming more comfortable in your own skin, and eagerly sharing that skin with the man you're married to.

Why is it do you think that many women are less inhibited when relationships are new and yet become more self conscious as time goes on? *Probably because women think that sexual intimacy is the price we have to pay to get the attention and affection we want. Once we land the man, we're not as motivated to keep paying that price. Or we begin to think that he's not as attracted to us anymore and withdraw as a self-protective measure. Or we simply lose interest ourselves when the busyness of life overwhelms us, and we fail to realize what an important aspect sex is in marriage – not just for men, but for women too. God designed us as sexual beings, and sharing ourselves with one another physically opens the door for a deeper sharing of ourselves emotionally and spiritually.*

You clearly have a great relationship with your husband Greg, but did he have any reservations about you writing so intimately about your private life? *When Every Woman's Battle first released, I asked, "Are you SURE you're okay with the whole world knowing what kind of woman you married?" He responded, "Shannon, if I thought you were the only woman on the planet who struggled with this, I'd be hesitant. But because I truly believe this is EVERY woman's battle to some degree or another, I'm so proud of you for being one of the first women to talk so openly about it." My husband, and even my children and my parents, have been my biggest cheerleaders. I'm so lucky and grateful.*

How has your book been received, in particular by the Christian market? Is there anything you would change or add in retrospect? The hardback version of *The Sexually Confident Wife* has educational illustrations (not glossy color photos – just pencil sketches) to cast the vision that no matter what size or shape you are -- size 2 or 22 -- you deserve to be sexually confident. These women have saggy boobs, or flat chests, cellulite and stretch marks – real women, not airbrushed supermodels that intimate us into feeling very unsexy. We decided to remove those sketches in the paperback version so that people could have a choice of whether to look at them or not. But it's funny how at conferences, when I explain the difference between the two versions, women run and grab the hardback version with the sketches! It sells out faster than any of my other books. Obviously, many Christian women aren't as uptight as we assume! ☺

I noticed that reference to God isn't really made until right at the end of the book. Was this a deliberate ploy for non Christians reading the book? After all the secular world probably wouldn't think of buying a Christian book in order to spice up their sex life! I didn't deliberately save it to the end. I just included it where it made sense to me in the section where I explored the four components of our sexuality – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. I simply couldn't talk about the spiritual component without talking about God and His perfect design for our sexuality, which my publisher was very understanding about. They gave me a lot of freedom to talk about my faith, and sex as an "act of worship" and prayer as a great "aphrodisiac." Occasionally someone takes offense that I didn't sprinkle Scripture all throughout the book, but I already wrote that book for the Christian market – *Every Woman's Marriage*. This book was for a broader audience, so I had to broaden my language beyond just "Christian-ese."

What's next on the horizon for you? Developing a series of fiction books along this line is a long-term goal, but for now I'm thoroughly enjoying mentoring other aspiring writers and speakers from all over the world. It's a 12-month online program called B.L.A.S.T. (Building Leaders, Authors, Speakers & Teachers). Readers can learn more at www.shannonethridge.com/blast.

As this edition of *Liberti* falls on our 5th anniversary what are your top 5 tips for keeping your marriage alive?

- Remember that emotional intimacy can't be required, but it can be inspired! Focus on floating his boat, and you'll be surprised how your own sets sail.
- Don't expect your spouse to fulfil every emotional need you have. That's God's job, and your job. Cultivate female friendships. Get a hobby. Let God romance you with awesome quiet times. Then anything your husband gives you is just icing on the cake.
- Kiss for 60 seconds at least 2-3 times a week. Don't let your kisses disintegrate into just flat "hello" or "goodbye" kisses all the time. A kiss should get marital juices flowing on occasion!
- Go through the motions of seduction (or being seduced) until your feelings catch up. They always do. Men are microwaves and women are crock pots. When we allow ourselves to warm up, we can indeed get very hot!
- That parental voice that keeps saying in your head, "Good girls don't!" – ignore that. Good girls DO when they are married, and they do it often and with great passion.