

KAREN SAID FRANCIS BAUMLI IS ALMOST AS WISE AS GOD.

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

“To eat shrimp.”

“But what was your main reason for going?”

“To eat shrimp!”

“Was this a business trip, and you used it as an excuse to eat shrimp?”

Karen was getting exasperated. “No! We just went to eat shrimp!”

The matter would soon become clear, even though my faculties for belief were understandably reluctant. The night before, Karen and a friend had boarded a plane in Columbia, Missouri, had flown to Saint Louis, from there had flown to a resort town in Florida (I forget which one), had eaten at a deluxe shrimp restaurant, had then spent a couple of hours “walking around the streets,” and finally had flown all the way back to Columbia. This lengthy round-trip was all accomplished in the course of the evening

and part of the night—in less than twelve hours. And now Karen was back at work.

Karen and I worked at the same counseling center. She had a Master's degree, was a good counselor, and enjoyed her work. I had the Ph.D., my official title was "Health Staff Consultant," which meant that I screened each mental patient for physical difficulties. As a counselor I specialized in clients with emotional problems concomitant with physical difficulties, and also in personality disorders.

We both were dedicated to our work as counselors, but there were huge differences between us. I was about ten years older than Karen, and divorced. Karen was in her mid-twenties but had never married, though she certainly wanted to be married. Karen was beautiful, with an absolutely gorgeous body that could make my entire body tumesce with desire. But she was absolutely off limits. She was a devout Christian, wanted to marry a devout Christian man and have children, and she was committed to ideals of purity, chastity, and was fully intent on remaining a virgin until she married. She would "save herself" for her husband.

I, however, was beleaguered by, and devoted to, my sexual appetites. Plus, my commitment to their indulgence was unflagging. Moreover, I was an atheist. The only thing I was saving myself for was the next carnal comestible. Karen and I, in other words, were polar opposites in the copulatory realm. We would never mesh sexually. We would never

marry because I wasn't interested in marriage. But I did bestow upon my body many a sexual thrill just beholding Karen. Especially on the days she wore tight-fitting slacks, and I would come up behind her while she was standing on the steps talking to someone. I would be eye-level with one of the most delectable asses I have ever beheld. I wanted to fondle it with my hands, but this, of course, was not to be.

Even if we had not been separated by these differences in religious beliefs, I am sure I would have avoided intimacy with Karen for other reasons. Her life was too different from mine. Financially, she was indulged and pampered by her parents. I, however, was petty much ignored by my parents, and I was frugal.

When I learned that Karen had two sisters and that they were "wild," I wanted to meet them. And I was sure this would happen someday since all three sisters lived in the same house. So when Karen decided to have a "swim party," I considered this a prime opportunity for meeting two young women as attractive as Karen, but who were not wearing the chastity belt of ardent (or adamant) Christianity.

Karen and her two sisters owned a nice lake-front house right in the middle of Columbia, and at their swim party I would quickly discover that neither of Karen's sisters at all measured up to her in the looks department. Both were somewhat fat, somewhat unattractive, and just like

Karen were enjoying economically privileged lives that were just too far outside the pale of the workaholic life I led.

Why were they so pampered? Because their parents were divorced, and both were wealthy physicians. One was a neurologist, the other an internist (I forget which was which), and they competed in trying to outdo each other in pampering their three daughters. The result was that one of the parents had bought this very expensive lake-side house right in the middle of Columbia for the three girls to live in while they went to college. Karen was still living there even though she was finished with college. Just as Karen's parents' money had bought that house, it also was their money that allowed Karen to fly to Florida just to eat shrimp, and to think nothing of the expense.

Karen spent much time, even at our lunch-hour gatherings when as many as twenty people might be present, talking about how she hoped to someday marry a nice Christian man who, until they married, would respect her desire to "save herself" for marriage. Under most circumstances, I think people would have made fun of her (behind her back) for such beliefs, but because she was so open and staunch about her beliefs, and probably also because she was so attractive, people listened to Karen sympathetically and obviously took the attitude (as did I) that even though they did not share her values they certainly supported her right to have those values.

But then a new note of excitement came in to Karen's reports about the chaste goals of her journey toward matrimony. She had succeeded in attaining a Christian boyfriend with beliefs similar to hers. He was very handsome, would soon graduate with a Ph.D. in something or other, and at last Karen seemed to be on her way toward a wedding night when she would get her chaste cherry busted and then go on to lead a life of matrimonial bliss.

Too busy to join most of the lunchtime gatherings, I kept abreast of Karen's adventure (she certainly did not want to know about my adventures), from bits and tidbits of information I put together from what I overheard. The romance seemed to be proceeding well, in a chaste Christianly manner, and I was glad for her.

But one late afternoon, when I was in my car, about to pull out of the parking lot and head home, Karen came out of the main building toward me, signaled for me to stop, then got in my car.

She looked very upset, and my first thought was that a major ruckus had just happened inside the building, either with a patient or with one of the other counselors, and I would have to go back in and deal with it.

But no. Karen needed to talk about herself.

This seemed odd. Karen had never come to me as a confidant before. And usually our work did not overlap since she specialized in substance abuse counseling which was an area I preferred to avoid.

Karen was not going to waste our time being reticent. The story quickly came out. She and the fellow she was now betrothed to had been indulging in some “heavy petting,” as she put it. They had done much talking about how much of this they could do and not feel sinful, and had at last made the decision that they would go to bed together, but there would be no intercourse. So about a week ago they had done so. Matters (desires?) quickly escalated, and against Karen’s will, the fellow penetrated her and ejaculated inside her.

Karen was devastated. Had she been raped? She wasn’t sure. After all, she had willingly gone to bed with a naked man.

She had not seen him since, but they had talked on the phone, and he kept saying what he had told her the night he had violated her—that he had done it because he could tell she really wanted it.

So now Karen was upset and confused. She wanted to break off the relationship, but since she wondered if he was right, she wasn’t sure what to do. She had talked with her two sisters, her preacher, a counselor, another preacher, several friends, and none of the talking had helped. She doubted herself, she was afraid that if she rejected the fellow this would be the wrong choice, so she didn’t know what to do.

She wanted my opinion on the matter, but I was wondering why she had come to me—an atheist, an uninhibited philanderer, a fellow who was often quite bawdy. But I knew I was a good listener. Also, I was the oldest

member of this counseling center except for the clinical manager with whom no one had a close relationship. And then it occurred to me that she had come to me precisely because she knew that my sexual practices were the opposite of hers. Since no one else had helped her feel better, maybe I would have something worthwhile to say on the matter.

I asked her some questions, just to make sure that what she had been relaying was clear and consistent, while also making sure to not seem voyeuristic. Then I said to her, "I've got something to say that might, at first, sound like the opposite of what I'm going to conclude with. So if you want my reply, you have to promise to listen to all of it." She readily assented, so I then gave a rather lengthy soliloquy: "Karen, he has you confused because he is saying he knew that you really wanted it. So he forced sex upon you. Well, the truth is Karen, you really did want it. You wanted it very much. You were in bed with him, you were desirous, excited, and yes, you really wanted it. He is absolutely right on that. It's a perfect case of where 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.' You had acted carefully because you know that the flesh is weak. But here is what is absolutely crucial about what happened: While it is true that you really wanted intercourse, it also is true that you really didn't want it. Part of you did, and part of you didn't. You had weighed this out in your own mind. You had talked it out with him clearly. You yourself had made a choice to be this naked with him and yet not have intercourse. You had communicated

this choice. He had agreed to it. So yes, you really wanted it. But also, you really didn't want it. You felt ambivalent. Two ambivalent feelings. One unambiguous decision. You made a choice. If your feelings were ambivalent, your choice was unambiguous, and his promise to respect your choice was unambiguous. So he completely violated your trust. He violated your trust not only in your sexual intimacy with him, he also violated your Christian values and your Christian identity. He violated you spiritually. So yes, he did rape you. He raped your body and he raped your soul. You had made a choice, he agreed to that choice, and then he claimed for himself the right to do what he wanted just because he knew your feelings were ambivalent. Well, ambivalent feelings do not undo an unambiguous choice, and they do not excuse someone who breaks a promise for the sake of violating your body and your soul.”

“So you think I was raped?”

“Absolutely. Of course you were raped.”

“Then why don't I feel raped? It doesn't exactly feel like rape.”

“Rape isn't always an exact feeling. There are degrees of rape. Or rather, there are degrees of violence in rape. You didn't fear that he would become violent in other ways. You weren't afraid he would choke you, or put a knife to your throat as he took you a second time. Or slash you up with a knife before he left. You weren't completely without trust toward him. It wasn't like a 'second-story rapist' who enters your bedroom in the middle

of the night, rapes you, and then kills you before he leaves. The violence was confined to the rape itself. The sex act. So you feel violated, hurt, confused, manipulated, and now he's even bullying you about your feelings. You don't feel raped because you did feel sexual with him. But you were raped, and you also were spiritually violated."

"Tell me what you mean 'spiritually violated.'"

"Remaining a virgin until you marry was a big value for you. Even though it's not a value I would hold for myself, I perceive it and respect it as a value for you. In you it is a value that is religious. It is as sacred as any value you have ever held. He smashed it to pieces. He trivialized it. He raped you. But given your relationship with him, that was not as frightening as it was shocking. It was like what happens when a woman is abused for the first time—the situation when a woman is beaten by her husband the first time. Look at it from that perspective. When your boyfriend raped you, he not only assaulted your body, he also beat you up emotionally and spiritually. By that act of violence, he has done to you what happens to a woman the first time she gets abused. He took away your belief in yourself. Look at you. You're doubting everything about yourself, just like a woman who, for the first time, has just been battered by her husband. After that first time, the woman doubts herself. Then he beats her again, and she doubts herself even more. With each beating, she keeps doubting herself

even more, until the time comes—and usually that time doesn't take very long—when she doubts herself into nonexistence.”

“So can I ever trust him again?”

“Of course not. If he would presume the right to violate and bully you about the one thing you hold most sacred about your body, he will violate and bully you over a thousand smaller things too. Maybe not immediately, but once he feels sure you have forgiven him this huge sin, he will start committing other sins too. He will bully every part of you. He will assume he has the right to make decisions about what you really want in everything. He will bully you into oblivion. You will be like a wife who has been abused for years. You won't even be a person anymore.”

“But what if I choose to stay with him, hoping I can change him?”

“Change a person who would commit a sin that colossal?! If you try to change him, you will fail, and you know it. You will fail utterly. Pretty soon it won't be you staying with him. You will have ceased to exist. You won't be you anymore. You won't be a self. You won't be a person. You won't even be enough of a self to be a Christian.”

She had tears in her eyes now, but she also had a determined look on her face. “You think if I stay with him I won't remain a Christian?”

“How much of your soul has been with Christ since that violation happened? How much time have you spent praying?”

“I haven’t even thought about Christ.” She paused, then added, “Come to think of it, I haven’t even prayed. Not at all. Not since it happened. I can’t believe I haven’t even prayed!”

“How can someone who stops praying, and absolutely neglects their relationship with Christ, be a Christian?”

She sat there a minute. A long minute. Then she said, “I’ve spent all this time trying to figure out if he’s correct. Whether or not I really wanted him to do it. You’re right. I really did want it. But also I really didn’t want it. That was what we both agreed to. So I’ve spent all this time talking to people, including my own preacher and another preacher, and I haven’t spent one minute praying for clarity, and not one minute even thinking about what this means for me as a Christian.”

“I’m sorry Karen. There is a terrible storm raging, pushing its way into your body and into the very center of your soul, and it is trying to tear apart everything in you that is spiritual. I think it’s time you keep the Temple of the Lord safe, and your soul too, by closing the doors against that storm of self-doubt.”

She nodded. Tears were still in her eyes. She got out of the car. “Thank you Francis. I think all this was helpful.”

I watched her walk back toward the building before I pulled away. Although I had been doing my best at being both kind and truthful, it still is the case that I am such a spiritual wretch that I did not take my eyes off her

beautiful ass until she had gone inside that building. It points to a defect in my character, I am sure, since I did not exercise custodia oculorum. And even now, although I feel chagrined at myself over the commission of this sin, I do not feel ashamed.

Karen did break up with the fellow. She did it within a day or two—I am not exactly sure how soon because I did not feel it appropriate to ask for details. But we did cross paths in the hall, and Karen stopped me, saying, “I left him. You’ve probably heard.”

“Yes. You did the right thing.”

“How do you know that?”

“Have you been praying again? And thinking about yourself as a Christian?”

She nodded. “You’re right. I made the right decision.”

“Of course you did.”

It was obvious that neither of us were in the mood for a long talk. She didn’t want to belabor the details. They obviously were very painful. And I had no desire to repeat any part of the soliloquy I had delivered only a few days ago. I patted her on the shoulder and started to walk on.

“Francis, let me ask you something.” I stopped and turned. “You’re an atheist, right?”

“Yes.”

“How can an atheist talk about God like you do?”

“This atheist isn’t as far away from God as you might think.”

She looked at me to see if I was being serious.

I was.

She saw that I was.

We walked on.

Time would pass. Karen would move away. I would leave that counseling center after another few years. Karen and I did not keep in touch. But then one day, about ten years later, I ran into one of her sisters. We recognized each other. Of course I inquired about Karen.

“She’s living in Colorado. And do you know what?”

“You can tell me.”

“I envy her. She got exactly what she wanted out of life. She married a Christian man. She was still a virgin on her wedding night.”

“Except for that one rape,” I interposed. (Perhaps I was being rude?)

“Yes. Except for that. Now she has three children. She’s so happy it’s just disgusting, and”

I finished her sentence with the worn, but tried and true, euphemism, “She’s doing well.”

The sister nodded. We talked a few more minutes. I could see she had gotten fatter. But she seemed happy.

“And how are you doing?” I asked politely.

“Oh. I have someone too. I’m not like Karen, you know. I’m living with my boyfriend. We’re happy together. It’s working.”

“Are you telling me you’re married?”

“No. But maybe. Someday.”

She smiled. I could tell it was working, and I genuinely felt glad for her.

Also, I genuinely felt happy for Karen.

“Well, tell Karen hello for me next time you talk to her.”

“I’ll do that.”

We said our goodbyes, but as we parted, she stopped me with the words, “By the way, do you know what Karen told me about you? A long time ago?”

“No. But are you sure you can remember what Karen told you that long ago?”

“Actually I do. I remember because it was amazing. Karen and I were talking one night. She told me about how you helped her sort out all that confusion after her trauma. She said you helped her a whole lot more than all of her friends and her counselor and even those two preachers. And then she said something I’ll never forget. What she said about you was this: ‘Do you know something? That Francis Baumli, he’s almost as wise as God.’ Can you imagine those words coming out of Karen’s mouth? Now do you understand why I remember?”

“Well, I hope she’s right,” I said, laughing. It was a lame response, but probably the only appropriate response I could give.

We then went our separate ways.

I have forgotten that sister’s name, and the other sister’s name too. But I still remember what she said about what Karen had said: “That Francis Baumli, he’s almost as wise as God.”

I take no pride in this judgement. The fact is, each of us, at some time or other, is probably almost as wise as God. But these are mere moments. Maybe they are only instantaneous revelations which will soon evaporate and disappear.

In my interaction with Karen about her rape, if I was almost as wise as God, I think it important to acknowledge that this small wisdom possessed a clarity that came from many years of studying, and writing about, gender issues. And maybe the realizations I had come to, as a result of that “gender studies” immersion, helped give me a clarity which allowed me to express those views to Karen. And maybe that clarity came from long years of contemplating the meaning of god, wondering about the reality of God, while always yearning for His actual presence.

Whatever the source of my ideas, at a very difficult time in Karen’s life, when she was floundering amidst a spiritual crisis, she had the rare privilege of talking with an atheist who, for a while (a short but crucial while), was almost as wise as God. Even we atheists occasionally have a

small claim to divinity. (And even though we are not reluctant to admit this, it also is the case that we are not reluctant about wishing that we could possess this privilege all the time!)

So surely there is warranted a humble yet simple observation here: namely, sometimes even an atheist has the right to put reluctance and shyness about religious language aside, and conclude his meditations with a pious, even fervent, "Amen."

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