

When God Writes your Love Story

Eric & Leslie Ludy

This week I am reviewing “When God Writes Your Love Story” by Eric and Leslie Ludy. I found my original copy of this book from 1999 with all of my original thoughts and notes too. This might feel triggering or overwhelming for some, shocking for others and even laughable for some people. The purpose of this series is not to laugh at or mock purity culture but to take an honest look at what was being taught and the devastating and long-lasting impact it can have. Proceed with the caution you need!

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One of the things that is very prevalent in this book is the narrative that we cannot trust ourselves, control ourselves, nor do we know what is best for ourselves. This is pushed significantly and often throughout the book and is the foundation from which everything stems. This theme of god having complete control and dominance over our lives, including our love lives, sets up a power and control dynamic in which everything that a human does is sinful, selfish, or idolatry unless it is of God.

“Why does it seem that the things I desire most in this life lead to my destruction?”^[1] There is a verse in the bible that talks about this exact sentiment. ...it promotes this idea that the things that we want and desire in life are sinful, will lead to sin and are not from God unless in a specific context. For instance: sex outside of marriage is dirty, disgusting, shameful, ripe with consequences, harmful and so much more. Even though we may want sex it will ultimately lead to our destruction both on earth and in heaven. (And of course the only way sex is good, beautiful, honoring, etc. is when it is in the context of one cis-hetero man and one cis-hetero woman in a legally binding, lifelong, monogamous marriage).

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Earlier in the book (page 13) they are clear ins stating that there are no rules, however, as they proceed through the book they, in overt and covert ways, indicate that if you want a true, lasting relationship—one that is beautiful and, in their words, a fairytale, there is a very specific lifestyle, set of rules, and relationship to god that you must have.

The reason this is important to point out is that it sets up not only unattainable goals, it also makes them the experts on what is required to receive this “reward” and it acts as an explanation for why you don’t have what you want (in this case, a marital relationship)—it strengthens the foundational belief that the system could never be wrong (including the rules and values it promotes) and it’s always the individual who is falling short in these areas. Therefore, it’s the individual who needs to keep themselves in check, repent of their sins, and change their life.

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Another example that in order to have this perfect fairytale relationship we must subscribe to a specific path of life. The problem with this is that it strengthens the base of power and control (aka abuse). In this scenario, God takes away anything that would distract us from him so that our full attention can be placed on him and he can have full power and control in our lives. Further, the problem with this is that this is billed as LOVE, GRACE and something we should be grateful for. Rather than seeing the god-figure's requirements as jealousy, abusive, manipulative, and controlling, it is billed as the ultimate form of love.

It was teachings like this that not only kept me from seeing the abuse in my own relationship with my ex partner but kept me in the relationship because I believed the abuse I was enduring WAS love. Why? Because I had already been conditioned to believe that the abuse, harm, control, manipulation, etc. that I was experiencing was normal and the way love was truly shown because that is how god was towards me.

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Another point strengthening the last slide...this constant recognition that we are not to question, wonder, or suggest. God's way is perfect, we are not to question it, he doesn't need our help—which is code for “I am not allowed to say no, have questions, give insight, have my own preferences, desires and wants...I must fully accept whatever it is that god gives me and when he gives it to me because he knows better than me.”

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Continued examples of this concept with the addition that if we try to take control of our lives its just not going to go well. Essentially what this first section of the book is doing is BRAINWASHING people to the point where they not only do not trust themselves, they vilify themselves, believe themselves to be evil and incapable AND then are told that if they allow this other figure (god) to have control then they can have everything they ever wanted.

I think it's important here to note also that the Bible—which is the foundational text book for these arguments—has VERY LITTLE to say about romantic relationships (and in fact, the book of the bible that talks the most about sex, Song of Songs, is talking about sexual escapades between two UNMARRIED people). The reason it's important to recognize that the bible doesn't say much about relationships and sex is that it then means that the principles that are being promoted within purity culture are actually not biblical but rather human interpretation, based on a desire for power and control, stemming from a foundation of patriarchy.

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Here is where we start to see that “falling into temptation” (aka having sex outside of marriage) will (always) lead to negative consequences that will force you into making choices that will impact the rest of your life.

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I was often told that one of the reasons we shouldn't have sex before we were married and why we shouldn't even date anyone other than our future spouse was because we give pieces of our

hearts away in these types of relationships—pieces that we cannot get back AND that will destroy the relationship with our future spouse. In this passage here we see the enormous guilt and shame that Eric feels having to “confess” to his wife that he had previous relationships and the immense insecurity and jealousy that Leslie had imagining Eric’s previous girlfriends. While jealousy, insecurity, guilt, etc. can be present in relationships outside of purity culture, what makes this particularly striking is that this is connected to SIN. The fact that they felt these things was because Eric had SINNED and now Leslie was facing the consequences of Eric’s SIN as well.

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Ahhh yes, the “dating prepares you for divorce” argument. This is a theme in many purity culture books: dating is preparation for divorce. The idea that dating encourages lack of commitment, breaking up with people over minor things, not valuing working through the hard stuff. To be certain, this can happen. However, the argument that dating prepares you for divorce ignores how dating can actually be helpful in preparing you for a more long term, committed relationship. Purity culture has no use for getting to know one’s self, understanding preferences in a partner, learning how to communicate, being attracted to someone.

I remember when I first started my practice a young couple came to see me who had lived their lives according to purity culture rules and they were miserable. They sadly explained their typical purity culture courtship and romance only to find shortly after the wedding that they not only didn’t know how to communicate and weren’t prepared to be married but that they didn’t like each other. They had nothing in common, their sex life was difficult at best, there was no physical attraction between them and they recognized that the only reason they had gotten married was the expectation of their church and the belief that god had called them together. After just a few sessions they decided to get divorced. This story is unfortunately common and leads me to believe that it’s possible, at least anecdotally speaking, that it’s purity culture that may prepare people for miserable marriages resulting in divorce (or miserable marriages in which both people stay in it because they think they have no other options).

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I remember the first time I read about this concept: that we needed to begin loving and committing to our future spouse before we had even met them. It was billed as this romantic gesture that would lead to a beautiful relationship. Practically speaking it meant that showing interest in a person who you did not end up marrying was actually cheating. This terrified me (talk about the immense anxiety and shame that was ever present the moment I was interested in someone and didn’t know if I would marry them—I lived in constant shame for the ways I was sinning against my future husband!)

Personal Story: I developed “practices” around this that would keep me focused on my future husband alone. On Valentines Day I would make him cards. I had a “husband box” in which I would put little knick knacks that I could give him some day. I had a “future husband journal” in which I would write him letters telling him how I was waiting for him. It grieves me to think about it now—I spent so much time and energy listening to and following these rules, trying to

make myself the perfect, godly woman for a perfect, godly man to be attracted to and it never, ever worked.

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Further reiterates the point on the last slide but with a bit more possessiveness. We see here where Eric begins to get jealous of the thought of someone kissing his future wife. This follows other purity culture teaching, however, in the sense that there is a level of possessiveness that is celebrated within purity culture...MY husband, MY wife (even if you haven't met them yet). Additionally, for a culture that promotes having no other idols before god, the level of obsession with wondering about, preparing yourself for, dreaming about your future spouse does feel both hypocritical and unhealthy.

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Here we start to see the “guarantees” of what will happen if you don't live according to the purity culture lifestyle...pain, shame, guilt, and disgust. We also see a lot of objectification of women in particular and a covert emphasis for women especially that engaging in sexual sin will ultimately destroy them and their future relationships—or worse yet that it would turn them into a man: being unemotional, viewing sex as casual, seeking to get others to lower their standards, etc.

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“Purity is more than just avoiding the “forbidden line” of giving away our virginity”
The biggest argument I hear from people when I talk about purity culture being a form of sexual abuse is that I'm whining at the “no sex before marriage rule”—that I am making too big of a deal of something and trying to justify my sin. This section of the book is important because it is here where we overtly see that purity culture is about far more than not having sex before marriage. As they state, it is a lifestyle that shows up in every area of our life, changes the way we interact and how we relate to others. The subsequent teachings and rules that go with this lifestyle are what are abusive, shaming, oppressive, manipulative, etc.

Page 136

Ahhh yes, the lovely discussion on the season of singleness. I'll have more to say about the specifics of this in future book reading posts, but for now I'll leave it at this: purity culture elevates the “season of singleness” (e.g. the period of time before you magically meet your future partner and before even going on the first date you know you are going to marry them) as a time where you get to PREPARE for marriage. This meant seeking out those who were older and wiser to teach us about the ways of life and relationships, for women especially this was a crucial period of time in which you needed to learn not only how to submit but you needed to begin practicing and mastering homemaking tasks (keeping a home clean, learning how to cook, being hospitable, taking care of other people's children, etc.) over prioritizing education and a career. And, this was a time where you were to use every spare moment to volunteer in ministry, preferably at your local church.

Personal Story: I took this very seriously. I look back now and can see how much time and energy was spent on learning what it was like to be a godly woman, practicing submission (I was told I needed to submit to all of the men in my life as a way to practice submission as well as so that it would be evident to my future husband when he saw me that I already knew how to submit), I QUIT JOBS so that I could spend more time volunteering with different ministries (all unpaid) and struggled to know how to justify my decisions to pursue higher education as many people around me felt that would make me a less likely candidate for marriage.

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There are several chapters in this book that highlight specifically the necessity of involving other people in our “love story”—because, again, we cannot trust ourselves to be able to make wise choices. This point is made clearly in the chapters in which they suggest, with no nuance or attention to the complexity of family relationships, that we need to look to our parents to be involved in our love lives—to guide and direct us and without overtly saying it, give us permission to move forward in relationships with others.

Page I remember after reading this book the first time I wrote my parents a letter asking them to be involved in my love life. It was a struggle to do because I knew that the relationship I had with my parents didn’t include them knowing me at a level where they would have been able to offer insight into a good match for me. I knew this. BUT this admonishment to involve my parents in my love life superseded what I knew to be true and so I moved forward with the invitation. And it was disastrous. Perhaps someday I will go more into detail but this resulted with incredible dynamics of power and control, “turning me in” to the church authorities and a level of disconnection that still haunts my relationship with them today.

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This page from the book further reiterates the point from the previous slide. And it’s also important to know that in purity culture people are encouraged to get married quite young...like 18-20 years old is considered normal. While I do believe that people should have full freedom to choose when they want to get married, the reasons for young marriage in the purity culture is to both guard against committing sexual sin as well as starting to have a family very young so that you can have more kids for god’s kingdom who will convert more people into this belief system. Neurologically speaking, this is why parents can be so impactful—a person’s brain at 18-20 is not fully formed. They literally do not have the capacities yet to understand things that someone older might. But if we involve parents in their lives they not only can add that wisdom in but also convince their child that this is the right, godly choice. They are encouraging children to make lifelong, complicating and complex decisions before they would even know that they have an option to do something else.

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Reiterating this theme that we have seen throughout the book of how awful we as humans are and how we therefore cannot trust ourselves. “We deserve to die for what we have done” is in reference to sin. ...the teaching that we deserve to die for the sins that we have committed. (However this completely defies all logic...they believe that we are inherently sinful which

means that from the moment we were born we were sinful. We were CREATED to be sinners....and since god creates all of us, god created us to not only be sinners but then punishes us for the thing he created us to be. Talk about the ultimate gaslighting!)

Final Summary

Alright y'all...thanks for coming to my dismal TED Talk on the awfulness of purity culture through the lens of "When God Writes Your Love Story" by Eric and Leslie Ludy. These are tough things to read and discuss; they might feel wildly triggering or they might be the thing that you needed to see in black and white to recognize how harmful and damaging these teachings are. For me this has been important to go back and re-process what I learned and what, unfortunately, still lives in my body, in part.

Many times while reading this book my anxiety and heart rate spiked...which showed me even more that these teachings are real and alive. I'm curious to know from you though...as you read through this IG story about this book, what comes up for you? What do you see/realize that you didn't before?