Jenny Letterman is steamed. While picking up a few things for dinner at the local Stop & Shop, she happened to bump into her next-door neighbor. Jenny makes a point of trying to avoid this neighbor, because she's a gossip, the kind of person who knows exactly who has lost his job, who's sleeping with whom, and all the other big and small secrets in the town of Shady Grove. But this time the gossip was closer to home. Mrs. Busybody, glancing furtively around the aisles of the supermarket, confided that she had heard the local elementary school was in the process of setting up a new sex education program, one that would be given to all its students.

Now, Jenny loves Glenwood, the school where her son, Joshua, is enrolled, and she adores Ms. Vasquez, Josh's third-grade teacher, who was a certifiable saint when Josh was having troubles with multiplication. Josh now invites grownups to test him on his times tables, up to and including twelve times twelve, which Jenny thinks is nothing short of a miracle, given how difficult he found multiplication at the beginning of the year.

Still, sex is something pretty special for her. As a Christian, she believes it's a gift of the Creator, to be treated with respect, and she's not at all sure she wants her son thinking about it just yet. He's pretty young for his age, and eight-year-old boys can treat anything as smutty. Sex is a delicate and complex matter, and while she has complete confidence in the school and Ms. Vasquez, she thinks it would be too much like signing a blank check to turn over something as special as sex to them. More to the point, like Mrs. Boland, she is convinced that Glenwood cannot—or will not—teach morality along with the lessons of where babies come from.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Melanie Stevens is busy putting the final touches on the new human sexuality curriculum that riles Jenny so much. Melanie and the school nurse, Bethany Burt, have been working on this curriculum for months now and have spent many hours reading other curricula and discussing what they acknowledge is a volatile issue, even though Shady Grove is becoming more sophisticated as more and more families like Melanie's leave the city to embrace its small-town atmosphere.

Trained as a social worker before she decided to stay home full-time with her daughter, Devora, Melanie has been a little surprised by how upset she finds herself becoming when she talks to Bethany. Part of it is that she and Rob moved to Shady Grove to get away from all the ugliness and unhappiness of the city, and it disturbs her to hear Bethany's tales of pregnant seventh-graders, eighth-graders with their third case of gonorrhea, and ninth-graders having unwanted sex with their stepfathers. Devora is younger than those kids and, God willing, will never be exposed to those horrors firsthand. Melanie thinks forewarned is forearmed, and fourth grade is none too soon to start education in the facts of life. (She would actually prefer kindergarten as a starting point for sexuality education, she says, but she's not sure Shady Grove is ready for that.)

As part of the process of getting a sex education curriculum going, Melanie and Bethany have reached out to what they imagine to be the whole community of Shady Grove: parents, businesspeople, clergy, physicians, and others. Because they weren't born yesterday, as Bethany tells me, they have made extra-sure to invite people from all across the religious spectrum. Invitations went out to Temple Beth-El, to Saint Michael's, and to all the old-line churches that have been in Shady Grove since its founding. When it came to the churches that have sprung up in the past few years on the edges of town—the ones that Bethany tells me look more like motels than houses of worship—things got touchier. These evangelical and Pentecostal churches, she says,

are "Christian," and the tone of her voice makes it clear that for her this is not a neutral description. Still, she contacted those churches too, and felt the glow of a job well done when she finally persuaded Reverend Smithers, the pastor of Calvary Christian Community Church, to come to meetings. Reverend Smithers, a bluff, hearty man with a winning manner, sings gospel in a way that brings to mind Anne Lamott's memorable phrase, "God gave the notes, he's just the channel."[1] He's also head of the largest of the new churches, and quite a catch for the committee. But unfortunately, Reverend Smithers never really seemed to feel at home with the group and finally begged off, pleading the press of other commitments.[2]

Anchored as they are in Shady Grove, Jenny and Melanie, Bethany and Reverend Smithers are part of something much bigger, a conflict brewing in small towns and large cities all over the country. Everybody involved knows the fight over sex education isn't confined to Shady Grove, of course. Melanie used to be a volunteer at the local Planned Parenthood office and called on her friends and acquaintances there when it came time to plan the "Family Life and Living" curriculum. The national offices of Planned Parenthood in New York helped by giving her guidelines for what a really good sex education course should cover, and so had the New York–based organization SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S.), which shared model curricula with her. When she became alarmed about how controversial sex education was becoming in a nearby town, Melanie was given the name of someone at People for the American Way, an advocacy group in Los Angeles that helps supporters of sex education and other liberal causes organize against the "right wing."

Jenny also found herself connected to large national organizations in remarkably short order. The week after she ran into her gossipy neighbor in the supermarket, she went to talk to her pastor at Calvary Christian—Reverend Smithers. He suggested that she call the local office of the Christian Coalition, and the person

she talked to was incredibly helpful, giving her the names of people at the Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America, and the National Association of Christian Educators. The association even helped find her a psychiatrist who ended up testifying to the Shady Grove school board that exposure to sex during what Sigmund Freud called the latency period (usually defined as between age seven and puberty) was developmentally unsound.[3]

Despite the help that both Jenny and Melanie were able to get from national organizations, the fight over sex education is not yet generating the kind of big headlines that have been sparked by abortion and homosexuality, or even sexual harassment. But the battle is getting closer every day.

The same advocacy group that Melanie turned to for help, People for the American Way, reported almost five hundred controversies over sex education across the country in the early 1990s, and I suspect that this estimate is on the low end.[4] As both Melanie's and Jenny's experiences suggest, conflicts over sex education are increasingly on the agenda of major liberal and conservative organizations, both religious and secular. Conflicting views about sex education have also moved straight into the heart of partisan politics. Opposition to the kind of sex education that has been taught for the past thirty years is now officially part of the Republican national platform and many state Republican platforms as well.[5]

How did sex education, which has been surprisingly common for the better part of a century and which has enjoyed very high levels of public support for most of that time, come to be so controversial?[6] What is it about sex education that makes people so passionate about it? And what is it that translates that passion into politics at the national level?

Answering these questions took me almost twenty years and a little over one hundred interviews, not to mention countless hours spent in school board and committee meetings of various groups. On my journey, I interviewed people in four communities, taught myself the mostly unpublished history of sex educa-

tion, and tried to follow the increasingly vociferous public debates that have begun to emerge on the airwaves and in magazines and newspapers.[7]

The interviews took place in communities I call Shady Grove (where Melanie and Jenny live), Las Colinas, Billingsley, and Lincoln Township. Each came to me in a different way, and each illustrates something different about sex education in the United States these days.

Looking for communities that were in the midst of some sort of fight over sex education, I first discovered Shady Grove, a once-rural town on the West Coast that is rapidly becoming a bedroom community for an urban center more than an hour's drive away. Old and new coexisted uneasily in Shady Grove; its small-town provincialism tucked uncomfortably beside its new, worldly, suburban self. Alfalfa fields were slowly giving way to tract developments, but when the wind blew the right way, you could still smell the earthy, sweet odor of the dairy farms that once dominated this community. Some children in Shady Grove attended the same elementary and high schools their parents had, sometimes even being taught by the same teachers, a rarity on the West Coast.

I spent more than four years in Shady Grove, talking to people more than once, chatting with the town's pharmacist, and sitting in the local café, which served hippies, sophisticates from the city, a contingent of Hell's Angels, and the occasional manure-spattered farmer in for his early morning latte. I've gone back several times in the intervening years to clarify points that came up as I pondered what people there had told me.

Next I spent a year in Billingsley, a small community in the South much like Shady Grove must have been in the 1950s. Still resolutely agrarian (tobacco remains a major crop in the fields surrounding town), the community, particularly the weathered, tumble-down tobacco sheds, sometimes looks like Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans photographs of the rural South in the 1930s. No one moves into Billingsley, and the old people lament that most

of the young people move out. Despite the fact that it too is only an hour or so from a major urban center, it has remained very much the small town for a very long time. I asked one Billingsley resident if any "outsiders" were involved in the sex education debate, and he named a woman who had moved to the community as a child in 1952.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, it seemed to me that almost everyone I interviewed in Billingsley was an active member of a church, although I did not know this when I chose it. The religion that cast the longest shadow was Southern Baptist, but it was followed closely by new nondenominational churches such as Reverend Smithers's church in Shady Grove. Here I learned to ask a question that had rarely come up in Shady Grove, namely, "And what does your pastor think of the sex education program in town?" One's pastor, one's church, and one's denomination were all-important social anchors in Billingsley, anchors that permitted others to locate you within the social and geographical hierarchy.

To many people, Billingsley probably *is* the story of sex education, period. It's rural, its inhabitants are not highly educated, and there is not a single Starbucks in the entire town, or at least there wasn't during the year I did my fieldwork there. More important, Billingsley is one of those towns where religion and churches still structure much of social life. As many people I interviewed will tell you, opposition to sex education is primarily (and sometimes, to hear them talk about it, exclusively) religious in nature. And not just any religion, but the kind of religion that predominates in Billingsley—evangelical, and particularly fundamentalist, Protestantism.[8]

But as is so often the case, looking at the role of religion in people's views about sex education in this town made it clear that real life is much more complicated than the stereotypes suggest. It is absolutely the case that religion does play a role in the opposition to sex education, but not in the clean, unambiguous way that most people imagine. For example, religion also plays a role, albeit a

more limited one, in mobilizing support for sex education. Mostly, religion gives people a vocabulary, a cultural tool kit, with which to talk about the issues that sexuality raises, and a set of templates for understanding alternative visions of family life, not to mention the larger world.[9]

Although Billingsley was the epitome of a small, religious, tight-knit community in the rural South, it provided an astonishing variety of views on sex education. Deeply devout Southern Baptists as well as others who identified themselves as born-again Christians argued both sides of the issue, with some passionately in favor of full, comprehensive sex education and others equally passionately opposed. (The word "comprehensive" in the context of sex education has a special meaning, which we'll explore below.) Being devoutly religious and even, as they called themselves, "hard-shelled" Southern Baptists, or evangelicals, was not the end of the discussion when it came to how people felt about sex education.

After Billingsley I moved on to Lincoln Township, an affluent community in the Rust Belt East, where I spent almost two years. Although the larger area in which Lincoln finds itself is indeed part of the Rust Belt, and nearby urban areas in the state contain (in both senses of the word) some of the most desperate poverty in the country, you wouldn't know it from driving around Lincoln. A little over an hour's train ride from Lincoln lies a cosmopolitan city where you can hear people speaking languages from all over the globe. Lincoln's residents are part of that global elite; the more successful are driven into the city in limos, and the merely comfortable take the train.

The houses in Lincoln verge on being estates. The much prized and tastefully restored older homes date from the Revolutionary War or just after; the "newer" ones are stucco-and-stonework Tudors that housed an earlier Depression-era generation of successful entrepreneurs from the city. In Lincoln, unlike in the other three communities I studied, most of my research involved observ-

ing stormy school board meetings concerned with the proposed implementation of a new sex education curriculum and reading documents that the various committees in town had generated in support of or in opposition to that curriculum. Events unrelated to my fieldwork cut short my stay in Lincoln, so most of the interview material in this book comes from the three other sites, although I do occasionally draw on my interviews from Lincoln, as well as my ethnographies (observation of participants) there. Lincoln served mostly to assure me that the forces I was discovering in the West and the South, in rural and suburban communities, existed in an affluent and long-established community in the East as well.[10]

Well into the research in these three communities, I began to feel something was missing. I had ideas about what was helping to mobilize support for or opposition to sex education, but I needed to test them, and two of my three field sites were far from my base in the San Francisco Bay Area. Shady Grove, where I had begun my research, was closer to home, but the controversy over sex education was rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

So I sought out a new community, in a different part of the West Coast, to test out my ideas. Las Colinas, as I call it, is becoming incorporated into the sprawl of its larger urban neighbor and is, like Shady Grove, an erstwhile small town feeling the pressures of change. The new twist in Las Colinas was that the curriculum causing all the uproar was one from the fastest-growing part of sex education, something called "abstinence only." This kind of sex education, in stark contrast to more prevalent versions, teaches young people not to have sex at all rather than how to have sex safely. The paradox in Las Colinas was that the people protesting the curriculum were opposed because they wanted more *liberal* sex education. I've spent large chunks of the past five years there, and as with Shady Grove, I find myself going back on occasion to clarify something that was said.

At least part of the reason sex education is in the limelight these days is that almost everyone agrees American teenagers

don't handle their sexuality very well. Myths to the contrary, American teenagers are no more likely to be sexually active than their peers in Europe, and they start having sex at roughly the same age, allowing for differences among the European countries.[11] Although the sexual *activities* of American teens are not so different from those of teens in the rest of the advanced industrial world, the *consequences* most surely are. Teen birth, abortion, and venereal disease rates are among the highest in the industrialized world.[12] More worrisome, about 20 percent of all AIDS cases in the United States are diagnosed among people in their twenties, and because of the long lag time between infection and symptoms, it is presumed that many of these people acquired the disease as teens.[13]

This litany, by the way, overlooks the fact that American adults don't handle their sexuality very well either, compared to citizens of other countries. Although most sex education programs don't pay much attention to adults (with the notable exception of AIDS prevention programs aimed at high-risk groups such as IV drug users and gay men), they probably should. Like teenagers, adult Americans get pregnant more often when they don't intend to, pass on more sexually transmitted diseases, and have higher abortion rates than almost any other adults in the industrialized world.[14]

Over the past three decades, a consensus about how to approach these problems slowly emerged among opinion leaders, experts, and the general public, and sex education was at the heart of this consensus. Between 1975 and 2005, as the nation confronted both a perceived crisis in teenage pregnancy and an AIDS crisis, sex education programs proliferated, based on the idea that young people needed more information to make better choices. By the 1990s, virtually all American teenagers had at least some exposure to sex education, and over that same period of time, everyone from the surgeon general of the United States, to the National Academy of Sciences, to the National Council of Governors, to most of the large philanthropic foundations, to the National

Council of Negro Women, and even to such groups as the Girls' Clubs and the Junior League endorsed more and better sex education as a way of curbing the toll that sex seemed to be taking on young lives. Remarkably enough, at one point, even both sides in the abortion conflict seemed to agree that more sex education was the answer, as such diverse groups as American Citizens Concerned for Life and the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) signed on. State after state mandated either sex education or AIDS education, and in some cases, both.[15]

But as Jenny intuited that day in the Stop & Shop—and this is where the conflict arises—the kind of sex education that people were turning to in the 1970s and 1980s presumes that marriage is optional and happens later in an individual's sexual career and perhaps not at all. In short, it is based on a set of sexual values that grew out of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, values that many people have become increasingly bold in challenging. Although proponents of sex education often assume that only the facts, and such generally accepted values as not hurting yourself or others, are being taught, people like Jenny are as adamant as any deconstructionist that there is no such thing as "just the facts" when it comes to sex. Moreover, as she and Reverend Smithers sensed almost immediately, the value at the core of modern sex education—the idea that sex is defined by *how* you do it (carefully) rather than *where* you do it (in a marriage between a man and a woman)—is something worth fighting about.

When this study began, it was possible to use the shorthand terms "in favor of" and "opposed to" sex education and pretty much everyone involved knew what was meant. The people who favored sex education in the schools assumed that young people would have a range of sexual choices open to them and that the task of sex education was to teach them how to make good choices. People who favored such education preferred to have it offered to children early on (ideally, starting in kindergarten), as a cumulative program that went through all twelve grades, and to have it be a required rather

than an elective part of the curriculum.[16] Proponents of sex education were also strong supporters of a curriculum that went beyond what they called the "plumbing" (basic anatomy and physiology) and into the complex issues of contraception and abortion, and perhaps some teaching to the effect that discrimination against homosexuals is an unacceptable form of intolerance. In general, advocates of sex education wanted a course that would help children come to understand and be comfortable with their own and others' sexuality and give them a way of thinking through the complex set of moral issues that the many sexual choices in front of them entailed.

In contrast, when this study began, people who opposed sex education in the schools were rock-solid in their conviction that parents, not schools, should take on the task of teaching something as intimate and personal as sex. Many parents revealed that they were grudgingly willing to turn a blind eye to the kinds of sex education programs in public schools they themselves may have encountered—namely, a reasonably factual discussion of the mechanics of human sexual and reproductive anatomy and perhaps some discreet discussion of issues such as menstruation and nocturnal emissions. As far as they were concerned, these were matters of physiology, not values, and no child was likely to hear conflicting views about nocturnal emissions or the function of the fallopian tubes between home and school.

What these parents emphatically did not want was what the proponents of sex education have increasingly come to take for granted as the sine qua non of modern sex education: an open, nonjudgmental discussion of sexuality that helps young people become more adept decision-makers. From the point of view of people who opposed sex education, the "values" that children should hold were clear-cut. They firmly believed that hearing a discussion of values not congruent with the values taught at home is confusing at best and morally destructive at worst. If you were doing the right thing as a parent, they felt, then neither a

child nor an adolescent faced any real decisions about sex until he or she was out of the home, and in the ideal case, not until the wedding night.

During the course of my twenty-year exploration of conflicts over sex education, American teenagers actually got *better* at handling their sexuality, and both kinds of sex education took the credit. Teenage birth, abortion, and pregnancy rates all dropped, because of two things that happened simultaneously.[17] First, teenagers became more likely to abstain from having sex than they had in the past. My calculations suggest that the probability that a female between fifteen and nineteen would be sexually active and not married went from approximately 29 percent in 1995 to 25 percent in 2002. In other words, almost half a million teens who would have been sexually active a few years ago now aren't.[18]

The other good news is that teens who are sexually active are far more likely than before to use contraception the first time they have sex. Using contraception the first time is often the most challenging time, since it means that one or both partners must plan ahead rather than act on impulse, so increases in this measure are especially heartening. Although the numbers are small, it looks like teenage girls more than doubled their likelihood of being on the pill the first time they had sex (from roughly 8 percent to roughly 17 percent) between 1988 and 2001, and teens using a condom the first time they had sex soared from half to two out of three.[19]

Jenny Letterman isn't impressed by these figures. She likes her school and she likes her son's teacher, Ms. Vasquez. She thinks of herself as pretty open, and in a few years, when Josh gets past what she views as the "squirmy" stage, he'll probably take one of the sex-segregated sex education classes that Pastor Smithers offers at Calvary Christian. She just doesn't want sex ed offered in the school to kids his age, and she especially doesn't want the kind of sex education that will help him "clarify" his "values."

This really annoys Melanie Stevens. She suspects Jenny, whom she knows from soccer league, is a lot more uptight about sex than

she seems to be. But what really bothers her is how Jenny apparently wants to keep all of the children of Shady Grove away from sex education, not just Josh. For heaven's sake, Melanie says, trying to keep the annoyance out of her voice, if Jenny thinks the home is the right place to teach about sex, why can't she just opt out and let Josh go to the library when the other fourth-graders talk about where baby chicks come from?

What Melanie doesn't understand is that this suggestion enrages Jenny almost as much as Jenny's reluctance to opt out infuriates Melanie. Although Jenny's feeling that home is the best place to teach about sex obscures more complicated feelings, it's a deeply held value nonetheless. If people come to expect the school to teach about sex, then what's the point of having a family? she asks me rhetorically, waving her hands in the air. For her, sex education in the schools is just what is wrong with America: impersonal institutions are increasingly taking the role families ought to be taking and are, in her opinion, shirking. When the fight about sex education at Glenwood started, Jenny thought she was just pointing out the obvious when she argued that no teacher, not even one as talented as Ms. Vasquez, could know as much about each child as that child's parents did, and parents should be the ones to decide when and what to teach that child about sex.

Jenny has other, purely practical reasons for opposing the opt-out strategy: she thinks her son will feel weird and different going to the library when everyone else stays behind. But where she finds herself at a loss for words is in talking about the big picture—about why this whole issue raises such troubling feelings.

Part of what is being fought about here, although neither Jenny nor Melanie is very good at articulating it, is an issue that emerged with the sexual revolution of the 1960s: the relationship of sex to marriage. Melanie, for example, thinks marriage is a wonderful thing, and she tells me that Rob is the best thing that ever happened to her. She and Rob married in their late thirties, and both of them had had intimate relationships with other people before

that. Although Melanie skips over some of the details, it is evident when we talk that she expects her daughter, Devora, to follow much the same route. Melanie would prefer Devora not to be sexually active in high school, but it's clear that she takes for granted that Devora will experiment sexually before she gets married, and that her deepest hope is that Devora, like Melanie herself, will have a life and see the world before she settles down. She doesn't want Devora to miss the pleasure and intimacy of sex while she's exploring herself and her horizons. One of Melanie's deep but unarticulated values is that Devora needs to have a wide range of experiences, sexual, emotional, and other, before she can happily settle down into a marriage without feeling trapped and resentful.[20]

Jenny would be horrified to hear this. For her marriage is the only legitimate—and safe—place for sex to occur, particularly for women. Her situation is a bit complicated, however, because she is far less confident about her ability to control Josh's sexual experiences than she would be about controlling a daughter's. For the record, she's ambivalent about whether male sexuality is inherently more unruly than female sexuality or whether our culture makes boys that way. She is clear, though, that male sexuality is very different from female sexuality and that daughters can only lose by being sexually active before marriage. Virginity is a special gift a young woman can give her husband, one that sets her apart from all others. At the same time, Jenny believes that sexual experiences before marriage make both men and women "damaged goods," hardened and jaded and closed off from the miracle of true emotional and physical intimacy a happy marriage can bring.

Because marriage, and by extension ideas about maleness and femaleness, are at the heart of this discussion, proponents and opponents just talk past each other in ways that infuriate everyone. Jenny says families should teach about sex and that Josh would feel discriminated against if he had to go to the library. Melanie says that while she knows that people like Jenny are doing a fine job of teaching about sex, the same can't be said of all

the parents in Shady Grove. She doesn't really address the point about how kids like Josh would feel, because she doesn't understand why Jenny can't just live and let live.

Jenny can't just live and let live because marriage, one of the most cherished institutions in her life, is being devalued in the classroom. When she and I talk, she echoes Mrs. Boland, arguing that because of the Supreme Court, schools can't and won't teach morality. (She's referring here to *Engel v. Vitale*, the famous—or, from the point of view of Jenny and her friends, infamous—"prayer in the schools" case.)[21] As she sees it, a cherished American institution, the public school, has become so oversensitive in its wish not to favor one religion over another that it has become actively antireligion. And, although for her, religion and morality are not exactly synonymous, she is convinced that any institution so nervous about anything that looks like the "establishment" of religion is not going to take on the complex job of bolstering marriage by telling students sex is wrong unless people are married. This is the nub of the problem for her, although articulating it is difficult. One thing that Jenny knows, and knows wholeheartedly, is that if information about sex is given without the framework of a moral code, then sex becomes something casual, merely physical, less than it is and less than it can be. In a metaphor that comes up over and over again, Jenny says that providing information without moral direction is like showing teenagers the car keys, telling them all of the mechanics of driving, and then being surprised when they take the car out for a joyride.

As Jenny herself found, arguing that sex education should be taught by families, not schools, became an increasingly untenable position over time. The twin threats of AIDS and teen pregnancy simply eroded the argument. In one school board meeting called to discuss the proposed sex education curriculum in Shady Grove, Melanie addressed the crowd by saying—with a glance in Jenny's direction—that while she trusted the ability of concerned parents to teach their children at home, they were in no position to vouch

for the abilities of other parents in town, including single mothers, recent immigrants from other countries whose English was poor, the depressed, and the apathetic poor. Her voice shaking with emotion, Melanie told the people sitting on hard metal chairs in the Glenwood elementary school lunchroom that if only one child in the community was to be ignorant about sex, "all of our precious, beautiful children are at risk of death."[22]

This argument put people like Jenny on the defensive. While they could and did argue that they were entirely capable of teaching their own children everything they needed to know about sex, few were foolhardy enough to argue that parents in general were doing a good job. Consequently, in recent years the fight across the nation has shifted, becoming less and less about *whether* sex education will take place in the schools and more and more about *what kind* of sex education it will be. Grudgingly conceding that most schools have to teach something about sex in this era of AIDS and out-of-wedlock babies, Jenny and people like her have increasingly become proponents of "abstinence-only" sex education, in contrast to Melanie's kind of sex education, which is now being called "comprehensive."[23]

As a result, abstinence education is an increasingly large part of what "sex education" has come to mean. In 1999, almost one of every four secondary school teachers of sex education reported that they taught "abstinence" education, and 40 percent of all teachers (including those teaching "comprehensive" sex education) thought that abstaining from sexual activity was the most important message they were trying to convey.[24]

Although there is almost as wide a variety of abstinence-only sex education programs as there is of the comprehensive kind, in general abstinence education teaches that marriage is the only acceptable place for sex, that contraception can and often does fail, and that abortions can and do leave lasting emotional effects on people. It also teaches the kinds of values that Jenny would second in a heartbeat: that the best kind of sex comes when you are emo-

tionally, spiritually, and physically in tune with your partner and that this kind of union can happen only when people have committed themselves in a marriage.

To its opponents, this kind of teaching is "fear-based" and inflates the rates of contraceptive failure and the psychological after-effects of abortion while overstating the effectiveness of abstinence education, all in the service of promoting the ideal of no sex before marriage. For the moment, it is important to realize that as far as the people most involved in the debate are concerned, the values are more important than the facts.

Jenny insists on abstinence unless people are married—not only for Josh but for all the children of Shady Grove—but not because she dreads or dislikes sex. Quite the contrary. As far as she can tell, sex in all its majesty and mystery is more at risk from the kind of sex education program that Melanie has in mind than from the values she'd like to see surrounding any discussion about it. Although she can never quite get anyone on Melanie's side to listen, she's militant about sex and inflexible in her commitment to sex only within marriage not because she's antisex but because she thinks sex needs to be protected. Powerful forces are trying to turn sex into something trivial, into just another form of recreation, and she regards people like Melanie as part of the problem, not part of the solution.

As Jenny points out to anyone who will listen, when she was growing up no one had heard of abortion, of teenagers becoming infertile for life thanks to sexually transmitted diseases like pelvic inflammatory disease, or of people dying from the consequences of a "gay lifestyle." (When Jenny talks about this, her fingers sketch the quotation marks around the words.) The daily newspapers didn't carry stories about affluent teenagers who murdered their babies at the senior prom, and child sexual abuse existed only in the minds of the twisted few. When she was a girl, there were far fewer sex education classes, true, but there were also far fewer of the sexual troubles that recent education about sexuality has been

designed to remedy. She, for one, thinks there may well be a connection, but it's not the one Melanie points to. While Melanie thinks that our sexual problems as a society are the result of young people not having enough information about sex, Jenny thinks it's just the opposite—our sexual problems are due to *too much* information. In fact, Jenny's slogan, and the slogan of all the parents in Shady Grove who join her in opposing sex education, is exactly that: Melanie's curriculum is "too much, too soon."

Melanie's view is that no sex before marriage is both unrealistic and unwholesome. She expects Devora to travel, get an education, and have a satisfying job before she is "ready" for marriage. (I spent years trying to decode the word "ready," because it contains an ocean of hopes and values.) And the thought that Devora would deprive herself of sexually and emotionally satisfying relationships until she settles down in her late thirties (the age that Melanie and Rob tied the knot) worries and saddens her.

These conflicts about the meanings of sex and marriage are taking place in and being shaped by a world that is very different from the one that Jenny and Melanie grew up in, and although they sense that this is the case, they are hard put to make the link between their own experiences and the larger world in which they find themselves.

What I know as a sociologist, in part because I have spent so many years talking with people like Melanie and Jenny, is that sex and love and marriage have undergone revolutionary shifts in just a few decades. In the years before Jenny and Melanie were coming of age, girls did not have sex with boys unless they were deeply in love. (Only bad girls were "promiscuous.") Sex was risky, true, but not in the same ways that it is today. In those more innocent days, sex meant pregnancy and with it the dismal possibility that the boy involved might deny paternity or simply leave town. But often enough, in the face of pressure from families, the community, and perhaps their own sense of what was right, boys married the girls they had "knocked up." In fact, during the 1950s, about

70 percent of white women pregnant out of wedlock got married before the baby was born.[25]

With the legalization of contraception in 1964 and the legalization of abortion nine years later, that world disappeared. What was once taken for granted about sex and pregnancy and marriage came undone. Now that pregnancy is a choice rather than a fate, the traditional understandings between men and women about what sex and marriage mean have undergone radical shifts.

For some women, the advent of contraception and abortion was liberating, permitting them to invest in themselves in new ways and to dream of being equal to men. For other women, however—for women who were less interested in higher education and careers and for whom marriage and a family were the main route to happiness and satisfaction—the sexual revolution and all it represented reduced their overall well-being by loosening men's ties to marriage and family. Now that sex is no longer a scarce resource and men don't have to promise marriage in order to get it, premarital pregnancy is no longer a way to chivvy a reluctant male to the altar, and single motherhood, and with it female poverty, are on the rise.

These realities shape the values that people like Melanie and Jenny bring to bear when they think about sex today. In the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud famously thought that life was sex in disguise. A joke, a pun, a slip of the tongue, a symptom, were all silent expressions of forbidden wishes in nineteenth-century Vienna, and the forbidden was very often the sexual. By looking at sex and sex education today, I want to argue the other side of that equation: that sex is life in disguise. When Americans talk about sex, we are simultaneously and covertly talking about all the things going on in our world outside of the bedroom. Gender, power, conflict, cooperation, religion, culture, class, the future, and even (bear with me) the global economy are there, as I hope to show you.