

## **THE BEST DEFENSE... IS A GOOD DEFENSE**

*There is one thing to be said about inviting trouble:*

*It generally accepts.*

May Maloo

Habitat for Humanity, one of the country's largest humanitarian organizations, shocked a nation of supporters when it fired its founder and president of nearly thirty years. From the *New York Times* to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, a sea of media served up the details: Millard Fuller, seventy-year-old charismatic leader, had been accused of inappropriate conduct toward a female staff member.

As it happens, Habitat for Humanity headquarters, as well as Millard Fuller's home, is in Americus, Georgia, about two and a half hours south of Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The many times that Mr. Fuller needed to fly out of Atlanta, the drill was for his assistant to flash an inquiry through the office for anyone else driving to the airport that day.

A ride shared was money saved. Moreover, from the passenger seat, Fuller had two extra hours to read and dictate letters. (I have received some of his airport-shuttle missives.) Mr. Fuller said that until he showed up for work he usually had no idea whom he would ride with – and for years the system worked. Then one day, the only other passenger was a female employee who accused Mr. Fuller of inappropriate behavior.

Millard resolutely denied the accusations. After a protracted and costly internal investigation, Habitat's board of directors, including former President Jimmy Carter, officially found "insufficient proof of inappropriate conduct." But the damage to Mr. Fuller's reputation – and to the organization he built to serve people unable to afford their own homes – was done.

Now, Millard Fuller and his wife, Linda, are special friends of mine, and I tell this story for several reasons. One is that, with varying degrees

of accuracy, the saga has been the subject of newspaper articles and editorials, letters to editors, Web sites, chat rooms, and petition campaigns. So I'm not bringing the topic out of obscurity. A second reason is that I believe Millard was wrongly accused.

I first met Millard when my firm was working for Habitat, work that ended before this story and Millard's removal. Millard and I had rendezvoused for a major event at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta where Habitat would announce a partnership with another large organization. As I entered the Atlanta Falcons' locker room, someone shouted my name and declared that he'd been waiting to meet me. For the next thirty minutes, I felt like the most important person in the world to Millard Fuller, and he and I became instant friends.

I soon learned, of course, that the Millard effect works on everyone who meets him; he is the classic people person. Top that with his love of God, and you start to understand how the man's professional profile reads like a Horatio Alger story in reverse: millionaire attorney, age thirty, sells everything and commits himself to the poor. It's also characteristic of Millard that his salary from Habitat was \$79,000, far below almost any lard nonprofit CEO (and a bargain compared with the \$210,000 the board is paying his successor). In plainspeak, I love Millard Fuller, support him, endorse him, and would defend him anywhere.

My third reason for mentioning this story is to illustrate the principle that one should even go overboard to protect his reputation, marriage, family, and work. While it may seem outdated or paranoid, and often is inconvenient, I submit that a married person is wise never to ride – or work, travel, dine, etc. – alone with a member of the opposite sex.

Insiders and Habitat for Humanity supporters can debate the reasons for Millard Fuller's controversial departure (the board drew a fire of criticism for his removal), but one thing is certain: until he climbed into a car to ride alone with a woman who was not his wife, he was safe from her slander.

‡ ‡ ‡

To say that a married man or woman does well to avoid close encounters with members of the opposite sex, therefore, is more practical than puritanical. Most important, it is *wise*. In a car, a restaurant, office, even a hotel elevator, to shun even the appearance of something inappropriate protects not just me; it protects the people I work with and the people I love.

I once read about a political candidate who was accused by a staffer of spending too much time behind closed doors with a female aide. The charge sparked a couple of days of media interest, and while the politician denied wrongdoing, he couldn't deny time spent working alone with his female staff member. Sadly, a good man's reputation was wounded by at least the perception of impropriety.

In the twenty-first century, compromising situations sprout litigation and media coverage like mushrooms. Public figures know that, and they do well to so conduct themselves that a wrongful charge of bad behavior would immediately incite a chorus of defense. If I am ever so accused, I want to have operated in such a way that a chorus of colleagues would rush to center stage to say, "She's lying! He would never work alone with a woman behind closed doors. I've never seen it happen – not once."

My firm was still in its infancy – just an administrative assistant, a client-service executive, and me – when we hired Beth to head our media relations work. Beth was a veteran of television news, where female reporters on assignment frequently ride alone with a cameraman. In my industry, out-of-town client meetings are equally common, but I saw the situation differently, so we needed a plan.

My informal manifesto to our first woman executive ran something like this: "We will never meet alone with the door closed. If at the end of a day we are the last two in the office suite, one of us goes home. No lunches or dinners alone together. No shared rides to the air port, and no sitting together on the flight" (forfeiting valuable premeeting time). "When renting cars out of town," I said, "we'll rent two – our client will reimburse us for one and our firm will pay for the other."

To this day, if we meet in my office and someone comes in and inadvertently shuts the door on the way out, Beth reflexively walks over to reopen it. (My staff also knows they can come in without knocking, another layer of self-protection.) That kick-off conversation between Beth and me was later codified into the firm's formal policy, and though not everyone embraces it immediately, no one has ever questioned its wisdom. Several clients, in fact, have asked for copies of our policy.

"The bigger the target, the more people shoot at it." Every hear that? I continue to be amazed at the public figures who live as if they don't at least know the principle. Several years ago while attending a large religious convention in a major city, I arranged to meet a potential client, a man well known in certain circles, in his hotel suite. I walked off the elevator, turned down the hall to the designated suite number, and knocked on the door, where I was surprised to be greeted by his female executive colleague.

Like many suites I'd seen during the convention, this one was a center of business, set up with light snacks in a sitting area that included a table and chairs, a bathroom, and an adjoining bedroom. The man and woman introduced themselves to me and we dived into our meeting. Later when I left the suite, the door closed behind me. I'm quite certain nothing untoward was happening, but as a public relations professional, I'm equally certain that if someone had suggested questionable behavior, there defense would have been Swiss cheese.

Having seen too many marriages, families, businesses, even churches and charities destroyed by once-preventable passion, I offer this simple observation: it is impossible to be physically involved with someone with whom we are never alone. While there are other ways to stumble (short of extra-marital sex), and we are all capable of stumbling, I am determined at least to make it more difficult for me to do so.

God built and blessed us with natural appetites and longings. In a broken world, He also knows better than we do that we all carry personal wounds. He knows how easily, particularly on low days, anyone can take a shortcut to a good feeling. When He commanded us not to steal, or lie, or commit adultery, He was saying: don't do these things to yourself. Because God loves us so thoroughly, I am certain that *don't* can be a most positive word.

My suggestions to avoid even a hint of indiscretion are not necessarily easy. And as I said earlier, they are frequently inconvenient. But

especially for people in the public eye, I urge you to take the hard road. For reasons that far transcend a feeling or a circumstance, we are wise to take whatever extra steps help us not to stumble – or even appear to.

Copyright © 2007 by Mark DeMoss, reprinted with permission from his *The Little Red Book of Wisdom* for distribution to pastors of the Pacific Conference of the Evangelical Church and for posting on the Web site of Every Marriage Matters, [www.everymarriagematters.org](http://www.everymarriagematters.org)

Mark DeMoss is president of The DeMoss Group, a public relations firm he founded in 1991 specifically to serve Christian organizations and causes. More than one hundred nonprofit organizations and corporations have sought counsel and support from his firm in the area of communications, media relations, marketing, nonprofit management, and crisis management. Mark and his wife, April, live in Atlanta, Georgia, with their three teenagers.

## **Male/Female Association Policy**

The DeMoss Group

Some of our clients also have internal policies and guidelines which address male/female association in the office or while traveling. Certainly, we understand that there is a wide range of opinions and personal standards on this subject. However, as a firm, we have adopted the following standard: no married employee shall ever be alone (closed-door office, automobile, restaurant table, etc.) with an employee of the opposite sex during the work day or while traveling or representing the firm or any of its clients. We realize there are occasions where adherence to this standard will present some level of inconvenience, but we believe it to be a wise standard intended to uphold the reputation of our firm in our market niche.

When traveling on business we prefer to follow this practice as much as is reasonably possible. However, we do understand that there may be some rare instances where adhering to this practice would be challenging or unavoidable without offending a client or being in an extremely awkward situation. In those cases we would ask that you exercise your best judgment understanding that you represent The DeMoss Group and Jesus Christ. Remember that you can always call your supervisor to inform them of the situation, which has the added benefit of providing some level of accountability.