

## [ ON THE LEVEL ]

# LESSONS TO LEARN FROM THE WOMEN SCORNE

by KATHLEEN J. WU

**T**he news has been so sordid in recent months that the front page really should carry a parental warning label. From Tiger Woods' reported affairs and John Edwards' out-of-wedlock child to South Carolina Gov.

Mark Sanford's "soul mate," there has been enough reported infidelity and human frailty to keep the tabloids busy for a lifetime.

Titillating though the reports may be, these tales offer regular working women some lessons on how to comport ourselves during trying times.

- *Have your own life:* Readers of this column likely are not full-time, stay-at-home moms, but they could be someday. If women lawyers do stop working for pay to be home full time with their children, they must find a way to stay connected professionally. That may mean regular lunches with former colleagues, staying on top of legal developments and attending CLE classes, or taking on contract work part time.

But for those who never learned this lesson from



their mothers, let me be the one to share the hard truth: Never be totally reliant on a man. Even if he never goes hiking on the Appalachian Trail, he is mortal and fragile. Death and disability are hard realities of many lives, just like divorce. Women, particularly mothers,

need to have their own means of support. Women who currently do not maintain a full-time income should have the means to gin one up in short order. Not only does earning one's own paycheck provide the financial means to survive without a husband if need be, it is a great confidence builder. That's something every woman can use.

- *Be less like Tammy Wynette and more like Alanis Morissette:* I see fewer wronged wives standing stolidly by their men, gritting their teeth during the press conference while their husbands admit to the world that they cheated. Thank goodness for that. Not only is it humiliating to the woman who must break out her pearls and best suit when what she really wants to do is settle in with a pint of Ben & Jerry's, but it also sends a terrible message to our daughters: Women are doormats who must endure, regardless of what indignities come our way.

I'm not saying the wronged wife should hold a dueling press conference to declare what a louse her husband is, but she should be noticeably absent during his mea culpa. Her absence not only sends the message that he's in the doghouse with the missus, but it also highlights the fact that, while the scandal may be public, the marital relationship and what goes on behind closed doors is private — and complicated. That's as it should be.

- *Women can be just as lousy as men:* With all the high-profile cheating husbands, it's tempting to write off infidelity as a male problem, but everyone knows it's not. After all, the majority of the affairs discussed in the press involved heterosexual encounters; at the very least, these men were dallying with women who knew the men were married, even if those women weren't married themselves. The other women don't get a free pass.

But married women go astray, too, and can be just as callous about the devastation their actions cause. Honestly, most working women I know are too exhausted to take on an affair. But it is worth remembering that, for better or for worse, women can be just as immoral as the men currently being criticized.

## Thick Skin

Working women also can draw lessons drawn from other high-profile women, like former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, who is in the news for something other than her spouse's infidelities. She teaches women lawyers to maintain a sense of humor and thick skin: Even Jenny Sanford, Mark Sanford's ex-wife, has shown herself to be remarkably resilient.

Palin, who is routinely pilloried in the media and the blogosphere, doesn't seem the least bit fazed by any of the negative coverage. In fact, if anything, she seems energized by it. For her part, Jenny Sanford has held her own on Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" and ABC's "The View," among other shows, as she promotes her book about her louse of a husband.

Palin and Sanford remind women lawyers that, even if we are wounded on the inside, we can't give critics or those who have hurt us the satisfaction of beating us down. This is a lesson all of us can and should use every day on the job.

Life in the spotlight is difficult. When it's complicated by scandal, it can be positively horrific. But these women, with their anything-but-routine lifestyles, can nevertheless offer those of us in the real world some lessons on enduring, and maybe even profiting from, the pressures of a life lived in the public eye.



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