

As Gwyneth says she doesn't condemn people who cheat ...

# Can you really still respect a friend who is having an affair?



Forgiving: Gwyneth Paltrow

*by Mandy Appleyard*

**W**HENEVER good things happened to my friend Alex, I couldn't have been happier for him. An impressive new job, the purchase of a beautiful house in France, his adoption of an aban-

doned Labradoodle — these were among the many moments we celebrated together in a friendship which has lasted, so far, for 16 years.

But when he turned up unexpectedly at my place one night, looking like the cat that got the cream, to share the far-reaching



details of his new relationship, I found myself wanting to slap him and eject him from my front room for ever.

The problem was that Alex has been in a committed live-in relationship with Heather for 19 years — and now a younger and very glamorous woman was making advances to him at work. Hey presto, he was having an affair.

Intoxicated by the early throes of this forbidden love, he was as excited as a child — breathless, careless and suddenly without the moral compass bequeathed to him by his staunch Scots Presbyterian parents, which was so unbending I used to call him 'Mr Proper'.

Alex had no intention of giving up either relationship, he confided. He knew that was wrong, but one brought him loving stability, the other an unbounded excitement which, in his 40s, he had never expected to feel again.

Alex has been my close friend since we worked together nearly two decades ago. He is funny, generous and staunch in our friendship, and yet his confession that night made me question, seriously, whether I even wanted to speak to him again.

So it was with absolute incredulity this week when I read Gwyneth Paltrow's latest flirtation with controversy: her assertion that she can still 'respect and admire' people who have cheated on their husbands or wives.

'Life is complicated and long and I know people that I respect and admire and look up to who have had extra-marital affairs,' says the Hollywood actress, somehow able to see past the monumental hurt and irreversible damage caused to a whole group of people when a man or a woman decides to rat on their partner.

I wonder whether Miss Paltrow would be able to muster quite the same level of forgiveness if it were her own husband's infidelity we were debating.

**H**AD Coldplay star Chris Martin arrived home in Belsize Park one night to confess to a long-standing affair with another woman, I doubt his cuckolded wife's first thought would be that she could still 'respect and admire' him.

Just picture the scene: 'I've been seeing her since Christmas — and I think I'm in love with her,' Chris might admit. 'I'm so sorry, Gwynnie. I know this is wrong, but I can't help myself.'

'Don't worry about it,' the wronged wife whispers in response, fixing a vegan, non-alcoholic, rice-milk cocktail as succour.

'We're all flawed and sometimes we make choices other people are going to judge. I've learned not to judge people for what they do.'

'Ludicrous, no? Of course, learning 'not to judge' is, at least on paper, a healthy approach to life. In reality, however, and particularly when it comes to infidelity, it is impossible not to judge someone who knowingly embarks on a

relationship destined, by its very nature, to cause untold hurt.

When Alex told me, six years ago, that he was involved with a woman nearly 20 years younger than him, he tried hard to win my approval.

'She's wise and unusual and just gorgeous — honestly, you'd love her if only you'd give her a chance,' he said.

'I think I would hate her,' I replied. 'I couldn't respect or like any woman willing to put herself in the position of mistress to a man she knows is committed to someone else. It's dishonest and sneaky, on your part and hers.'

Alex's confession also put me in the invidious position of trying to avoid his partner Heather, then of colluding in his lies by pretending, on the occasions when we did meet, that I knew nothing of his betrayal.

I resented him for putting me in that position, and for being willing to compromise our treasured friendship for the sake of someone he'd just met.

I felt desperately sorry for Heather, particularly when she went through a breast cancer scare. I was at their place for dinner one night when she talked about having found a lump in one of her breasts. I remember glancing

across the table at Alex, who looked pathetically sheepish, wondering how on earth he would handle a diagnosis of cancer in a partner he was cheating on. I felt sick: so sick, I couldn't eat the dinner they had invited me round for.

Thankfully the lump turned out to be a benign cyst, but I'll never forget the hideous discomfort of that evening.

On another occasion, Heather asked me to go shopping for a dress for her to wear to Alex's work Christmas party. We bought the dress, then she insisted we stop at the wine bar for a drink and a chat on the way home. Two large glasses of Pinot later, Heather confided that she thought Alex was about to ask her to marry him.

'What makes you think that?' I asked nervously.

'Just something about the way he has changed. He seems more attentive, more loving, and I got the impression he was sounding me out about a wedding.'

She looked so happy, whereas I felt wretched, convinced that what Heather was reading as increased attentiveness was Alex's guilt-ridden attempt to put her off any scent of his affair. Granted, I think

infidelity is a particularly charged issue for me. As I was growing up, I saw the misery it brought to several close family members — good women, made lonely fools of, by men who decided they would have their cake and eat it.

It may be that I am more scarred than most by that early childhood glimpse of the devastation caused by infidelity — not least to the person committing it who, in my experience, always seemed to end up tearful, tortured and begging for forgiveness from the partner he or she had cheated on.

**B**UT I challenge anyone who comes up against infidelity first-hand not to know its misery — which makes me wonder how much of it Gwyneth Paltrow has seen at close quarters.

Alex and his young colleague lasted about three years, until she decided it was time to move on. A father-of-three with a common-law wife and, seemingly, no intention of walking out on his family must suddenly have looked

like a bad bet to a beautiful woman wanting children with a man of her own.

Alex and Heather remain together: she is, seemingly, none the wiser about his affair. He and I still enjoy a trip to the theatre together, we love a heated argument about which Martin Scorsese film is the best, and I still count him in that rare coterie of friends for life.

But I sometimes think our friendship was fractured by his affair. Somehow, since then, Alex's judgment seems a little less sound, his choices a little more self-serving and, most troublingly, he clearly has a capacity to lie (and get away with it), which is not high on the list of attributes I seek in a close friend. I still value our friendship, but something in it has shifted.

I wish I was possessed of Miss Paltrow's superhuman compassion. In the absence of it, I just hope I am never again swept into the maelstrom of a friend's affair. It's a drama I can do without.

■ *SOME of the names have been changed in this article.*

