

# Polyamory - What it is and what it isn't.

by  
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*"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail"*  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

## **Polyamory - What it is..**

*"Your love is located within you. It is yours to nurture and savor, to give to others in any way you choose. Love must be without qualifications or demands. You must learn to find ecstasy in other peoples happiness. Once you feel love for yourself, it is quite normal to give it away." Wayne Dyer Gifts from Eykis*

Polyamory has been defined as the philosophy and practice of loving more than one person at a time with honesty and integrity. Synonyms for polyamory are responsible, ethical, and intentional, non-monogamy. Because those descriptions are somewhat clumsy, the term Polyamory was coined in the late 80's by a pagan Priestess, Morning Glory Zell, and defines a range of different lifestyle alternatives. In most cases, but not all, this involves some sexual or at least intensely intimate sensual behavior.

There have been various polyamorous communities and communes, perhaps the most famous being the Onieda Community in New York State in the mid-1800's, but generally they are isolated and keep their heads down, given the prevailing moral climate.

What do Polyamorists, in general, say they believe?

Polyamorists say that their philosophy is nothing more than a straightforward acceptance and celebration of the realities of human nature.

Polyamorists say that sex is not the enemy, that the real enemy is the deceit and betrayal of trust that results from trying to shoehorn our natural selves into a rigid, unnatural social system.

Polyamorists say that sex is a positive force if applied with honesty, responsibility and trust.

Polyamorists do not have to individually meet every need of each partner; they have help. If your wife loves opera and you dislike it, maybe one of her lovers will enjoy taking her to hear it. If he is also a computer whiz, and helps fix your computers when they don't behave, you are a very lucky person.

Polyamorists say that love is an infinite, not a finite commodity. An example of this is with children. When my oldest daughter was born, I loved her with every ounce of my being. When my son was born, I found that I didn't have to give them half a love each, I could love them both fully. My third child is loved as much, if not more, than the other two.

This also applies to friends - when you meet someone new, you don't have to think about who you are going to drop off to make them fit. As a woman said when explaining why she chose polyamory - "I refuse to accept the myth that I have to stop loving one person before I start loving another."

Polyamorists say that loving someone does not give you the right to control that person's behavior.

Polyamorists say that jealousy is not innate, inevitable and impossible to overcome. But they deal with jealousy often, usually successfully. There is a new term for the opposite of jealousy. "Compersion" is the feeling of joy that comes from knowing that the one you love is well loved by someone else.

Polyamorists say that love should be unconditional, rather than the monogamous proposition that "I will love you on the condition that you will not love anyone else" - "forsaking all others" is how it usually is put. And as shown by history, monogamy and marriage are no safeguards against falling in love with someone else.

Polyamorists believe in long term emotional investment in relationships, and while the goal is not always achieved in poly, it is also not always achieved in monogamy.

Polyamorists believe they represent true "family values". They have the courage to live an alternative lifestyle that, while condemned by society, is satisfying and rewarding. Children having multiple parents are more likely to be better cared for, and less likely to feel abandoned if someone leaves the family.

## **The Contrast with Monogamy**

One of the nearly universally accepted assumptions in our society is the assumption that the monogamous pair is the only valid structure of human sexual relationships, being so superior that it doesn't warrant scrutiny. In fact, our culture puts so much emphasis on it, through cultural norms, modern literature and films, that serious discussion on the subject of alternatives is rare. Monogamous marriage has even been incorporated into the law of our land in the section that specifies how money for sex education must be spent. It is a focus of the religious right when they talk about how to reduce welfare, how to reduce abortion, how to reduce single parent families, and many other issues.

The reasons given for monogamous marriage being the only acceptable form of couple relating, and the only place where sex is allowed, generally fall into two categories.

1. It is our natural state (i.e., hard-wired)
2. It is the only moral state, the one approved by God - all other options are inherently sinful.

It is interesting to note that these are essentially the same reasons given by the fundamentalist right for their condemnation of homosexuality, namely that it is unnatural and immoral, and explains the affinity of polyamorists to the GLBT community. There is an excellent Beacon Press book by E. J. Graff, "*What is Marriage For*". Graff's six reasons for marriage are: money, sex, babies, kin, order and heart. She provides an excellent historical review of marriage and convincing evidence that our view of marriage is a very culturally determined one, and not a "natural" condition of the human organism.

If intelligent life is about the free and responsible search for truth and meaning then it is apparent that unquestioned answers are more dangerous than unanswered questions. Therefore, questioning monogamous marriage might be thought of as obligatory. Are we hard wired for it? Is it the only "moral" way of relating sexually to others?

## **It's only Natural.**

*"The complexity of a system is limited only if the system is rigid, inflexible and isolated from its environment. Self-organizing systems in continual interaction with their environment are capable of tremendously increasing their complexity by abandoning structural stability in favor of flexibility and open ended evolution."*

*Erich Jantsch. Design for Living.*

In examining the natural structure of things, the binary system doesn't really stand out. The atomic structure has three parts; proton, electron, and neutron. These then combine to produce a complex array of atoms and thence molecules. Architectural structures generally, from the pyramids through to the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller, are based on the triangle. In music, a three-note chord is more dynamic and powerful than one made up of two notes. I know these are not persuasive arguments, but the triad is also a very common poly arrangement.

The increasing evidence from animal research is that fewer and fewer species (once thought to be so) are really monogamous in the wild. In the animal kingdom, less than 5% of all animals are now thought to be monogamous.

The evolutionary biologists posit that there are many good reasons for nonmonogamy, but their theories are difficult, if not impossible, to test. The anthropology argument for monogamy, that a man would only protect his children if he was sure of their paternity, is being questioned, most recently in a book called "*Cultures of Multiple Fathers*". In this study, the authors found evidence that showed that the children of women who had sexual relationships with many men had better survival rates - because of "potential" paternity, they were less vulnerable.

Of the 1270 human societies catalogued in Murdoch's Ethnographic Atlas, about 85% indicate some form of multi-spouse relationships. Even the few societies that theoretically espouse monogamy, like ours, have trouble showing any evidence that it works. On the contrary, there seems to be a lot of evidence that Western humans don't do monogamy well in the high divorce rates, high rates of infidelity, the highest teen pregnancy rate in the western world, high single parent family numbers, and other indicators. We often see people leave an otherwise good marriage because they fell in love with someone new, in what might be called serial monogamy. In short, the argument that the human animal is "hard wired" for monogamy is difficult to support.

In any case, since we humans are so bad at monogamy, other freely chosen relationship structures should also be supported.

**It is sinful - God doesn't like it.**

*"Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others." Oscar Wilde Chameleon.*

*"Confusing monogamy with morality has done more to destroy the conscience of the human race than any other error." George Bernard Shaw*

The sinfulness and wickedness of sex is based on the assumption that God doesn't like sex. This poison has its roots in Ancient Assyria, and the religions of Mythra and Zoroastrianism, which first put forth the idea of "the obscenity of the flesh." The sex drive, being one that cannot be denied, becomes a rich source of implanted guilt and shame, used to manipulate and degrade the individual. Therefore any sexual (natural) feelings need to be accompanied by shame, and therefore kept secret.

Somehow this shameful, sinful act is transformed into sacred overnight if accompanied by the right words by someone with the appropriate qualifications to marry people. It does not seem to matter how the marriage was arranged, for what reasons the people are marrying, or even if they want to be married. The only requirement is that they go through the legal process.

Without going into it too deeply, a perusal of most mainstream religions show that

1. Many of the ancient texts were written by polygamists, and

2. Most of the rules were based on considering women as property, rather than as a result of a solemn promise between equals.

It is also worth noting that no matter how strict the moral teachings, or how severe the punishments, be it from the Taliban, the Bible belt, Rome or Washington, human beings persist in trying to satisfy their sexual desires. A recent news article reported that 40% of nuns had a history of being sexually abused, either before or within the Roman church. The data on priests is slowly becoming public. The data on the general public is harder to obtain, given the resistance to admit to being abused, or being an abuser. It is clear that sex crimes put a lot of people in jail.

There is historical evidence of religions that embrace our sexual nature in a positive way, found on temple carvings from Asia, pottery from Europe and elsewhere, but it is not a feature of current Western mainstream religious practice.

Serial monogamy is perhaps an unconscious compromise between the cultural ideal of monogamy and the facts of human nature - in other words, we acknowledge that you can love more than one person, but only one at a time. The destructive effects of serial monogamy on children are well documented, with 8 million single parent families in the US, infidelity-fueled acrimonious divorces, through to the spate of spouse murdering lately. Much of the evidence seems to indicate that human attainment of the cultural ideal of monogamy is a myth.

The moral argument for monogamy is a weak position. A better moral argument can be made regarding what is best for each individual and for society, that is, do we make life better for each and all by insisting on sex only in monogamous marriage of heterosexual couples, or on letting individuals find responsible ways of relating that, in Pagan terms, "harm none". Liberal religion has taken a fine stance supporting homosexual and heterosexual couples, and unmarried couples as well. What is so hard about seeing the parallels to the "more than a couple" part?

It is a reality that there are many people now relating sexually in groups greater than two. The reason I keep referring to "relating sexually" is that this seems to be the stumbling block for many. If polyamorists were to keep it platonic, not be sexually involved with people they love in numbers greater than one, most would applaud their loving behavior. But when they admit that they not only love more than one, but have sexual relationships with more than one, all the red flags come flying out.

If you watch TV at all, you will know that polyamory is getting a lot of play, from episodes on Ally McBeal, talk shows like Montel Williams, John Walsh, Geraldo, and HBO's Real Sex. There are many poly friendly films available from Hollywood, and of course the Really Rich and Famous can do what they please about relationships and get lots of favorable press. What has brought polys out of the closet is the Internet, where people who thought they were the "only ones" find lots of company.

### **Polyamory - What it isn't..**

*"Current sexual practice can no longer be explained by the old theories and we do not yet understand it in the light of new ones. Racing ahead of history, we now find ourselves in a new territory." June Singer The Energies of Love.*

Polyamory as it is defined is frequently misunderstood. Polyamory is not "The Answer". If you are looking for a quick fix for relationship problems, don't look to polyamory. It is a choice, as is monogamy, that needs to be taken responsibly, and brings with it as many, if not more, challenges. It is definitely not a fix for a bad marriage or other relationship problems.

The most widespread misunderstanding is with swinging. Swinging is essentially recreational sex, also known as wife swapping ( though curiously not husband swapping). Research has shown that swingers are largely indistinguishable from the rest of the population except that they are people who would rather have sex than

play bridge on Saturday night.

Swinging does share a lot in common with polyamory in that it is nonmonogamous, intentional and responsible. Both lifestyles share the idea that sex is a positive, pleasurable and natural part of being human, and not a synonym for love. The main difference is that swinging focuses on casual sex and tends to prohibit other intimacy, whereas polyamory is more concerned with enduring intimate relationships that include sex. There is however some crossover, with people arriving at one via the other and vice versa. Unfortunately, in our society obsessed with promoting the cultural myth of monogamy, the salacious aspects of swinging are often used to reputationally smear both swingers and polyamorists. Examples include the Wyoming politician who withdrew his candidacy in the 2002 election when his lifestyle was exposed, the attempt in 2002 to disqualify Jack McGeorge as a UN weapons inspector in Iraq because he teaches S&M and espouses sexual freedom, and the effort to blame the parents in the 2001 child killing in San Diego because they were swingers. Many polys wished Bill Clinton had said he loved Hillary and Monica, and that Hillary was supportive of that relationship, but it looked more like cheating than loving.

Swinging and polyamory are not "free love" in the 60's sense of the term. (This seems to be one of the objections of those who survived, or were wounded, in the sixties.) In a lot of cases, free love in the 60's was a response to the enormous freeing up of taboos against sex that occurred at that time, and often was not accompanied by honesty or responsibility, but used as an excuse to have a lot of sex. It was frequently grouped together with drugs, (as in the mantra of "sex, drugs and rock-n-roll") which allowed it to be discounted as "a phase," facilitating a return to the "traditional" values that were reestablished in the 80's and 90's.

The challenges besetting the putative polyamorist are:

## Sex.

*"If W.H.Auden is correct when he observes that 'As a rule it was only the pleasure haters who became unjust', then only a civilization that fosters erotic celebration can usher in a new era of justice-making" Matthew Fox Original Blessing.*

This is the bit that trips most people up. When you cite the example of infinite love regarding children, people can understand the concept, but somehow sexual love between consenting adults is seen as different. We confuse sex and love too easily, often employing sex to do the work of love and love to do the work of sex. For a long time adultery was the only grounds for divorce, yet in reality, it was the deceit and betrayal that were the problems, not the sex itself.

As the Chinese proverb says "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name." Understanding the difference between sex, love and intimacy will go a long way to solving relationship problems.

The more we study sex, which has only been done scientifically in the last century, the more we realize how complex, variable and universal it is. As pointed out earlier, enjoyment of sex was considered evil, particularly in women (witches). Then, after Freud, it was often considered a sickness. For many years, nymphomania was considered a disease of women who liked sex. (See Groneman.)

To top it off, sex has become politically incorrect, attacked from both the left, the radical feminists who equate sex with the degradation of women, and the right - well, we should all know about their attacks on comprehensive sex education and medically correct sexual health information.

Either way, sex is seen as sinful, sleazy and best kept private. And the ACLU help us if we have any visual depictions of sex. Of course, violence is entertaining for the public, only sex is rated X.

We have become crippled by our fear of sex, allowing it to become a trigger for all kinds of hysteria. Think of the knee-jerk reaction to the term "Internet porn". Several recent books focus on this hysteria born of sexual

fear, including Lynley Hood's outstanding book "A City Possessed" and Judith Levine's "Harmful to Minors - The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex", a volume that provoked substantial hysteria of its own when published recently. And yet, despite all the dire warnings, we find that humans continue to explore their sexuality in a rainbow of ways - the sex drive will not be denied. Tom Robbins, in "Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates", cites erotic celebration, as opposed to mindless procreation, as one of the six things that make us different from the rest of the animal kingdom.

So sex is not the enemy. When accepted with honesty and responsibility, it could well become part of the solution, as Fox outlines in the quote above.

## **Jealousy.**

*"The only way out of jealousy is through it. We may have to let jealousy have its way with us and do its job of reorienting fundamental values. Its pain comes, at least in part, from opening up to unexplored territory and letting go of old familiar truths in the face of unknown and threatening possibilities." Thomas Moore Care of the Soul.*

This is the other big myth - that jealousy is innate, inevitable and impossible to overcome. Indeed, showing jealousy is even taken as proof of love, and is used a valid excuse for violent and aggressive behavior. Until recently, catching your wife in bed with a lover was a defense for murder in some places. Jealousy, possessiveness and control are also at the core of domestic violence, which thrives in the privacy of monogamy.

Our culture seems addicted to three core beliefs about relationships that are almost guaranteed to create jealousy in even the most well adjusted people. Identifying and dismantling these beliefs is the most effective way of dealing with jealousy.

### **Core belief #1**

If my partner really loved me, there would not be any desire for an intimate or sexual relationship with anyone else.

This is based on the scarcity model of love, in which a partner's emotional or love interest in somebody else means that I will be loved less. It is as absurd as the idea that to have a second child is an indication that you don't love your first child enough. It also presumes that sex and love are the same thing and meet the same needs.

### **Core belief #2.**

If I were a good partner/spouse/lover, my partner would be so satisfied that they wouldn't want to get involved with anybody else.

This belief is even more insidious. With the first belief you can at least blame the problem on your partner. This belief makes it your fault for not being the perfect lover. This is also the basis of the widespread romantic myth of the "one and only person on the planet". This is also guaranteed to cause serious self-esteem problems, which is fertile ground for jealousy.

### **Core belief #3.**

It is just not possible to love more than one person at a time.

This again is based on the scarcity theory of love, that I only have a finite amount to give.

All of these beliefs are connected to a primal fear of loss and abandonment, however unfounded. Neale Donald Walsche, in his series "*Conversations with God*" described fear as "False Evidence Appearing Real". I prefer "Fantasy Existing As Reality", in other words, we imagine the worst possible outcomes and then believe that these are our "real" feelings.

Polyamorists replace these core beliefs with three new core beliefs.

### **New Core Belief #1**

My partner loves me and trusts me so much that we can allow our relationship to expand and be enriched by experiencing even more love from others. There is an abundance of love in the world and there is plenty for everyone. Loving more than one person is a choice that can exponentially expand the potential for giving and receiving love.

### **New Core Belief #2.**

My partner is so confident in me and our relationship that having other partners will not create jealousy that will destroy our love.

### **New Core Belief #3**

Whatever socially unusual arrangements we have set up in our love lives, they have been agreed to consciously and responsibly by everyone involved. We insist on integrity in our relationships.

Once you can get away from the "either/or" polarity, and accept an "and/both" approach, or as some Polys say, having your Kate and Edith too, many of the accompanying demons associated with jealousy will disappear.

### **Practicalities.**

*"Eccentricity has always abounded where and when strength of character has abounded: and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor and moral courage it contained. That so few dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time" John Stuart Mill*

We live in a culturally monogamous society, so to espouse polyamory certainly puts you in the eccentric category, "the lunatic fringe" so to speak. In the current political climate, this also brings with it dangers. This is illustrated in cases where children have been removed from their parents because they were not living in the mandated norm of mum, dad and the kids. To come out as poly is a vulnerable thing to do, given all the misunderstandings and all the sleazy, sinful innuendo. It is also the reason why poly people relate to the gay and lesbian community, who have been through, and in many cases still are going through, the same process. Polyamorists are certainly viewed by the societal majority with the utmost suspicion.

Polyamorists also fully support the right of anyone to select monogamy as a life choice, and believe it is the right choice for many people. The key here is choice.

*"It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong."  
Voltaire*

Given all the hassle, why bother to be polyamorous? It is certainly not to be able to have more sex. If that is what you are after, you will probably have much more success operating under the widely accepted model of "It is OK if nobody knows." To be open is to be too weird for most people.

But to realize that you are polyamorous in a monogamous world can often mean going through life with the sense that you are harboring a dirty little secret. It can cause isolation, alienation and an inability to be intimate

with people - you are hiding a core part of yourself.

For Polyamorists, the rewards are simple. One of the best gifts you can give yourself is the permission to be yourself. By loving yourself unconditionally, and respecting all your qualities and inclinations, you allow yourself to be at peace. This becomes part of a larger process of self-differentiation - of determining who you are and what is important to you. To live as a poly requires the same value base as living morally, ethically, honestly and responsibly.

### **Questions for you to answer.**

*"A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" Unitarian Universalist affirmation.*

If my partners' happiness is important to me, why should I get upset if others can make them happy? What is more important, my partners' happiness or who gets the credit?

If I find my partner attractive, sexy, and lovely and desirable, why should I feel surprised and threatened when someone else does? In fact, should it not give us something more in common - a shared interest? (In the same way that we like the teachers who like our children.)

If monogamy is so natural and hardwired, why is there such a large relationship industry - the "How to make it right" of magazines, books, TV shows, marriage guidance, etc.?

Acknowledgement:

This started as a Sunday message by Derek McCullough, a UU from NZ. It evolved into a presentation to other UU folks, and finally to this article. Thanks to the Journal editors who carefully reviewed and edited this work.

Revised 2/23/05

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[Return to Front Page](#)