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Sex and Relationships

Reflections on living outside the box

Dossie Easton

Introduction

For the past twenty years, I have worked as a licensed marriage and family therapist in San Francisco, seeing clients and relationships in private practice. I currently supervise two intern therapists who are preparing for licensure. I also teach many workshops and classes in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, both for participants in explorative sexualities and for professionals who wish to gain cultural competence in working positively with people whose lifestyles include BDSM and polyamory. I have worked formally in sex education and counselling since joining San Francisco Sex Information in 1973. Although I have read a lot of what has been published about sex and relationships I did not learn most of what I write about in libraries. I have been an active sex radical since 1961, consciously polyamorous since 1969, and proud co-author with Janet W. Hardy of *The Ethical Slut: Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Adventures*.

I am profoundly grateful to my friends, lovers, colleagues, and clients for all that they have taught me over the past fifty years. I see myself as an experientialist: I believe what I experience. Whether or not I can prove it to anyone, what I feel is as palpably real to me as I assume everyone else's experiences are to them. So I base my understanding on my accumulated experience, and it is my firm belief that participant-observer is the best position from which to explore and understand sexualities which have rarely been observed with a friendly eye in our cultures. I am happy to note that friendly eyes are becoming more common, and it is a great blessing to me to now be able to live my life and do my work completely out of any closet.

Celebrating Diversity: We live in a society in which coupling and the nuclear family have achieved mythological status as the gold standard of love, sex, and relationship. We are instructed that people who really love each other will move in together and live as a couple. If, after five years or so, they are no longer happy living together and they separate, the relationship is deemed to have failed and they must not have truly loved each other. They are also

told that they don't really love each other if they experience desire, fantasy, or actual sexual connection outside of the twosome.

Relationships that do not conform to the nuclear pattern are deemed dysfunctional: participants are pathologized as commitment-phobic, incapable of intimacy, suffering from disorders of attachment, and they get labelled as sex addicts and sluts. Our governments privilege the couple with legal and financial support, while our courts may punish people who widen their sexual horizons with punitive divorce settlements and loss of custody of their children. All this despite the fact that the 2000 census in the United States found that only 24.1 per cent of households consisted of nuclear families, compared with 40.7 per cent in 1970.

To better understand what is going on, we need to look at how we form our cultural and scientific beliefs and assumptions, in particular the common practice of trying to understand any phenomenon by reducing it down to one single first cause. Reductionist thinking works well for medical technology – when a group of symptoms can be traced back to a single cause, we can often treat the symptoms by cutting out or killing the cause.

In our quest for simple answers, we have acquired the habit of idealizing what is 'normal', by which is meant average. If 60 per cent of people are monogamous, does that mean that the other 40 per cent don't have meaningful relationships? If 60 per cent of people spend six hours a day watching television or surfing the internet, this might be 'normal', but probably not very healthy. If 60 per cent of the population is too scared or too shy to fully explore their sexual potential, maybe the rest of us could help them out.

We particularly tend to pathologize and sometimes criminalize sexual diversity. Alfred Kinsey wrote:

The publicly pretended code of morals, our social organizations, our marriage customs, our sex laws, and our educational and religious systems are based upon an assumption that individuals are much alike sexually, and that it is an equally simple matter for them to confine their behaviour to the single pattern which the mores dictate ... Even the scientific discussions of sex show little understanding of the range of variation in human behaviour. More often the conclusions are limited by the personal experience of the author ... Abnormal may designate certain individuals ... (who) are not as usual in the population as a whole, but in that case, it is preferable to refer to such persons as rare. (Kinsey 1948:197–201)

I was four years old in 1948, growing up in a monocultural colourless town near Boston where how we claimed we lived was obviously the right way and all other ways were clearly inferior and inadequate. In 1962 I fled New England and moved to New York City to live in an immigrant neighbourhood where I got to know people from all over the world, who had fascinating and *different* ways of doing relationship, intimacy, communication, conflict, gender, and sex. I was entranced to be immediately transformed from a failure at being a soft-spoken, self-sacrificing, self-effacing candidate for wife and motherhood to being a powerful outspoken creative woman with chutzpah.

In this chapter, and in this volume, we intend to celebrate diversity in cultures, in families, in relationships, in kinship groups, in intentional communities, and in sex.

“Normalcy” is often enforced by legal or social opprobrium. Sex-negative forces attempt to limit sex by constraining access to birth control and disease prevention. This is particularly egregious in my own country, where schools are required to teach ‘abstinence-only’ sex education, which adds up to no education at all, and our teenagers face dreadful danger of disease and unwanted pregnancy when responsible and accurate information about sexual health is not available. Birth control clinics and access to abortion are constantly threatened, and there has been hysterical opposition to a vaccination programme that could protect young women from cervical cancer.

Most of us are taught that sex outside of whatever boundaries our culture espouses makes us bad people, ‘dirty’, unworthy of respect and fair game for anyone who decides to assault or rape us. We may be considered unfit parents, and in many countries around the world, could be jailed or even executed for sexual variance of any kind. In Northern Europe, the many countries that have eliminated oppressive laws criminalizing consensual sexual practices between adults seem to be doing just fine, and their citizens have not become maniacs or criminals. Such countries stand as a fine example that there are no societal dangers in permitting sexual diversity.

Modesty is enforced in most countries, particularly sexual modesty. What percentage of the world’s population today has a master bedroom with a door that closes? If modesty were required to procreate, we would be extinct. Anthropology is rich with examples of how we lived before prudery took over. In one African culture studied by Beach and Ford, if you came across a couple of villagers enjoying sex in the tall grass, proper behaviour would be to hunker down with one heel firmly in your crotch and quietly rock yourself to orgasm, then leave, careful not to interrupt the cries of joy (Beach and Ford 1951).

Evolutionary science has a startling bias towards monogamy in studies of sexual behaviour. This is peculiar, seeing as few animals, including humans, are in fact monogamous¹. I think we need to question the reductionism and sexism in our arguments about sexual norms; medical and psychological professionals routinely squash diversity by pathologizing anything in their field of ignorance. Evolutionary scientist Joan Roughgarden writes:

Medicine seizes on the often tiny anatomical differences between people, and on differences in life experience, to differentiate them from an artificial template of normalcy and deny a wide range of people their human rights by defining them as diseased. (Roughgarden 2004)

On another front, too many religions seem to operate on the conviction that God hates sex, making sinners of us all. I have worked as a therapist with a client whose church elders called him frequently during his teenage years to make sure

he wasn't masturbating, and another whose father showed her a knife when she was twelve years old and explained that he would have to kill her to protect his honour if she had sex before she was married. I often wonder if there is a political strategy in this. If everyone feels guilty, ashamed, and terrified that God does not accept them, does the population become easier to control? I prefer a gentler and more pleasure-positive spiritual awareness. My favourite quote on the subject comes from Sister Wendy Beckett, art critic and nun, who looks at the sexuality, sensuality, and nudity in much great art like this:

Why (should) anybody not delight in the creative work of God? God made the body. (Will we) suggest that God made mistakes about certain parts of the body? ... He's done these shameful things and we must do our best to cover them up? This is not the faith. The faith is that God looked at his creation and thought that it was good, thought that it was beautiful, made in the image of God. (Beckett 1997)

We often ask 'What is sex for?' Not often do we reply that sex is good, a wonderful experience, in and of itself. Too often we try to harness sex to the support of societally approved goals. We can see in the present that basing relationships solely on passion and romance is not a very good strategy for creating long-term life partnerships, nor a predictor for skills at sharing a mortgage. And, on the other hand, why would we value virginity as the coin of exchange for a successful marriage?²

When our culture insists on affirming the nuclear family by defaming sex and desire in the name of stability we are being asked to become a lot less than we can be. We are told that our desire is dangerous and destructive. Limiting the dynamic flow of passionate energy to a crabbed, cramped pipette and damping the flame of desire down to a flicker until we manage to forget about it, in my experience, results in a lot of disappointed and frustrated people trapped in unrewarding relationships.

Our sex can be so much more than we have been taught is allowed. When we constrict sexuality, we in many ways strangle our creativity and our personal growth, which constitutes setting up roadblocks to societal and personal progress. When each of us stretches to become all that we have the capacity to be, we will be free to create the rainbow of relationships and sexualities, not to mention families and tribes that are truly our birthright. Because sex is wonderful and good for its own sake. Because it sets us dancing in delight, vibrating to amazing rhythms, travelling together in fantastic connections, and opening our hearts to love and spiritual connection. It is my experience and my firm belief that sexual freedom is spiritual freedom.

We were taught, at some time before we can remember, not to masturbate in the living room. Babies and toddlers explore all of their bodies, genitals just like their toes. We may have been taught that touching ourselves is dirty and disgusting, and many of us grew up in a sex-negative culture where we were taught that masturbation was wrong and unnatural.

Blinded in this blizzard of condemnation, how can we even imagine sex as something clean and good? Sex has the power to expand our awareness, to generate universal loving acceptance of each other and delight in each person's individuality, and to teach us to celebrate bringing our differences together to form new templates of what relationships can be.

Oxytocin: Our bodies evolved a rather remarkable hormone called oxytocin, which promotes bonding, increases trust, and are released in response to touch, massage, nursing, skin contact, and orgasm, whether alone or shared with another³. Oxytocin builds trust, a necessary way to identify our tribe from predators and dangerous animals, and our families from the neighbours. Oxytocin are the physiological expression of our capacity to bond with many people. We are arguably the world's most social animal, with a built in ability to build intimate connections into extended families, clans, tribes, cultures, and civilizations. Thus the expanded intimacy of sharing sex with a number of partners seems more likely to support than to destroy our societies.

What about romance? First, let me point out that, while romantic love is indeed an amazing journey, after the wonder and excitement of its beginning, this journey often proceeds into the dark and shadowy parts of our psyches. Struggle often ensues. Romantic love and the glory of *limerence*⁴ is no predictor of a stable future relationship. Falling in love is wonderful, and I, for one, will never say no to that experience. I have, however, learned, as Khalil Gibran most beautifully put it: 'Even as (Love) is for your growth, so also is he for your pruning' (Gibran 1923). Sex and romance are wonderful for personal growth, but not so stable a rock on which to found our families.

We can observe that people in technologically advanced cultures tend to be more mobile in their relationships. The average person can expect to enjoy several important sexual relationships in a lifetime, and a number of lovely 'flings' might occur when one is not coupled. Our relationships may work very well for a few years, and then people may come to feel stuck or unhappy, and need to move on to the next part of their life. We could save ourselves a lot of grief if we accepted this as a fact and let go of finding something wrong with the relationship or, worse yet, some serious deficiency in that other person we used to love, that lets us feel justified about leaving. Only allowing the ending of a relationship because of catastrophic wrongness is a tribal custom we could well do without.

Perhaps it would be better to develop customs and rituals to protect and support us through times of endings and new beginnings. When all sexual relationships are not about making babies, when we enter into sexual connection to meet our needs for love and emotional growth, perhaps we don't have to get coupled to have a love life. We could create relationships that exist for their own sake, not in service to financial stability or reproductive goals or anything but delight and connection and exploration. We can use all this lovely bonding and trust to build relationships, extended families, and communities.

When we expand our freedom of choice we can generate enormous diversity in relationships, and thus enjoy abundant supplies of whatever each of us needs in our life, whether it be a fuck buddy, a meditation partner, a gentle lover or a rough and tumble affair. We can have intimate friends, many adults to help raise the kids, a sense of community, a culture that fits us and our sexuality, and maybe even new ways to nurture civilization.

Sexual Extended Families: Researcher and swinger James Ramey, in *Intimate Friendships* (1975), proposed that expanded sexual intimacy could become the foundation of modern extended families, bonded together through shared pleasures and intimacies, creating a tribe, a clan, that famous village we need to raise a child. Over the years I have belonged to a number of such families, some overlapping, some quite distinct, since I decided in 1969 to invest my security, not in my partnerships, but in my community. I have been rewarded with a shifting kaleidoscope of familial experience, unbelievable support while raising my child, and abundant supplies of free-flowing love.

The Ethics of Sluttery. Our notions about the rights and wrongs of family structures come from adaptations in relatively recent history to the situations we are living in. In the American melting pot, we are enriched by the rich diversity of ways people from all over the world build relationships and families. What would be the moral values of a sex-positive civilization of ethical sluts?

Ethics for me is about being kind to people, and treating my neighbours the way I'd like them to treat me. We can start from the notion that all sexual acts between consenting adults are just fine. I like to propose an expanded definition of consent for use in slut communities: consent is an active collaboration for the pleasure and wellbeing of all people involved in any interaction, including some who may not be present.

Slut ethics require respect for everyone, including all of your lover's other lovers. Everyone's boundaries need to be considered and honoured, especially the boundaries that are about feeling easy and comfortable and safe. Although we may ask a partner on occasion to stretch a bit to accommodate our needs – considering that we all grew up in a culture that never taught us how to stretch beyond our jealousy – we can negotiate agreements about how much stretching feels possible at this particular time. When we succeed in stretching today we acquire new skills that will support us in stretching further tomorrow, and so we generate a learning curve in the direction of more freedom. Nobody's needs or feelings should be discounted. When we cultivate the willingness to listen to each other we can really appreciate the emotions we are sharing in any interaction. Then we can become free to choose the boundaries of our relationships and of our families, and thus free to choose, even invent, the kinds of families we wish to build. We would be free to choose monogamy and if we did, it would actually be our choice.

One very important boundary we need to be serious about is taking the responsibility for our own emotions. We most commonly perceive our feelings

as something that happens to us, rather than something that we do. We get in trouble when we are not willing to feel an emotion. We wind up projecting our fears and insecurities onto our lover or our lover's lover. When we feel bad we would love to be able to blame someone else, but all we accomplish when we do so is to disempower ourselves. When we find ways to feel our emotions and get the support we need to move through them and keep the flow going, then we can grow and evolve⁵.

Let me give you an example from my own experience of how we might honour the entire family and still get needs met. I had a lover when my daughter was young who was married and also had kids. He and his wife occasionally declared sexual monogamy, usually for about three months, when there was a family difficulty to work through. This happened one November when his father had a heart attack. Taking a vacation from our sexual connection in no way shut me out of the family. I have very happy memories of Daniel and me roasting a bunch of ducks and a goose for Thanksgiving dinner while the kids played cheerily in the living room and Daniel's wife set out hors d'oeuvres.

Security is built on the foundations of honouring people's boundaries and being very conscious of what commitments we are making. In complex blended families commitments are agreements, not universal truths about the best way to make choices. I can count on my family if, for instance, I get seriously sick or need help, and I count on myself to help those close to me. This is my security.

Intimate relationships are not necessarily sexual. My longest life partner and co-parent was the gay man who raised my child with me for eight years. Our bond was profound, we fit together beautifully, and we might still be making home together if AIDS had not come along. Ethical sluts need to maintain really solid practices around safer sex and birth control – for me, that goes without saying, but it surely bears repeating.

A commitment to some form of predictability is part of most slut agreements. It is useful to talk about this and not just assume that you have the same picture of predictability that your partners do. How much advance notice of dates do you expect? Is it okay to flirt at a party, and which parties? (Perhaps not at church events or company picnics.) If we can't come home at the time we planned, how do we arrange phone calls and such? Who is out of bounds from your point of view: relatives, teachers, co-workers, your boss, your therapist? Important detail: when we are all at the same party, am I welcome to join any conversation you may be engaged in? Probably yes, but many people wind up hiding miserably in corners fearing that their partners don't want them around right now. Compare your pictures, then figure out how everyone can feel safe, free, and welcome.

Slut communities have developed some wonderful forms of matchmaking; it is so different from sneaking around when your partner will actually introduce you to that cute person you are feeling shy about. A lover of mine once started a great tradition. We were out at a club, and an attractive person

had been eying me behind his back. When I told him about this as we were leaving, he gallantly helped me into my coat and then strode confidently over to the cutie in question, pen in hand, to say, 'My lady would like you to have her phone number'.

We work on being particularly thoughtful about our lover's partners. We can't assume they want to play with us, and it would be appalling to assume that someone should share sex with us just to be polite. When we are invited into some sex that we don't want, we find ways to be gentle and compassionate when we decline an invitation: 'No thanks, that doesn't fit for me right now, but thank you, I'm flattered'.

We remember to honour the gifts we bring to each other. We share our delights, we express our gratitude, we remember to honour the hospitality of partners and roommates and children and parents and everyone who is welcoming us into their family. To do this we practice getting bigger than our judgments. I may not be wildly enthusiastic about straight macho men or competitive beauty queens, but I am a grown-up, and I can usually find positive ways to deal with people in my intimate circles that I might not myself have chosen. These efforts have been rewarded with some surprisingly deep friendships with people I was not initially drawn to.

The ultimate slut ethic is to tell the truth as much as is humanly possible. If we tell the truth in a kindly manner with due regard for the feelings of the person we are telling it to, then all of our interactions will be based on truth and that makes life so much cleaner and easier. This can be difficult: we have all learned to keep our crushes, our fantasies, and our desires profoundly secret to protect our partners and conceal our shame. We may well fear that our partner will find some of our truths uncomfortable. But sharing our individual truth is how we learn that crushes are normal, fantasies are normal, desire is normal, our interest in sex is healthy and loving and normal. We need to get comfortable with our sexual truth. So practice. Tell the truth in a supportive and compassionate manner, and keep on telling it.

What about kids? Kids benefit from having a big extended family, multiple coparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and many households available to them. The opportunity to experience multiple family cultures is hugely beneficial – kids in tribes learn that there are a lot of different ways to live together. Some families talk easily about conflict, others do not. Some family cultures are noisy and active, others more quiet and serene. Kids learn diversity and grow up with abundant resources and skills for dealing with family and relationship problems. We evolved to grow up in big extended families like our ancestral tribes; we can reclaim our ancestral skills at getting along.

It can be difficult when our children go to school and other kids tell them that their families are wrong. In schools our kids meet others who have been deliberately denied information about sex, for reproduction or for pleasure, and our kids may be confronted with scorn and humiliation, even violence, for

being open-minded and knowledgeable about sex, same sex relationships, and the like. One six-year-old girl I knew came home from school all upset, because the other kids insisted that if her mother wasn't married and wasn't a virgin, then her mother was going to hell. The child came home terrified. Our kids have a right to be safe from religious oppression.

On the positive side, at a polyamory workshop I recently attended I ran into a man in his forties whom I had co-parented back when he was four. He was mighty proud that a member of his constellation of parents had written *The Ethical Slut*, and I was proud to see him exercising *his* family values.

Many Intimacies: There exists a huge diversity of ways in which to relate and connect that include sex. Everyone of us can enjoy and benefit from variety in relationships within our own lives. This is what being a slut means to me. I can form relationships with different people that feature different kinds of connection and commitment. I can relate to people who are different from me, and others who are similar, and I can learn from all of them.

To me, sexual connections are all relationships. Even if we meet in a club and go to one of our homes for a few hours of steamy sex and never meet again, we have still met and connected. We have related. The commitment in a one night stand is to share pleasure in the present moment and unburden ourselves of fretting about the future. Other relationships endure over time, ranging from many years of regular connection and family membership, through occasional dates spread over a remarkable period of time, to perhaps living together, all three or four or five of us.

Or not. I look to my nearly twenty-year relationship with my co-author Janet as an example. Since 1992, we have been lovers, best friends, co-teachers of many workshops, and co-authors of five books about sexual lifestyles. Our creative process is profoundly connected to our sexual relationship: we write and think and play and edit and work and play some more. We cook together too. We have never lived together.

We have profound differences in how we manage our physical environments and money, and we could never make agreements we could both live with about everyday life. Most of the time we have known each other we have been in primary relationships with other people – hers male, mine female. I think one of the things that make our connection work over time is that we don't expect to get married. We share play and sex and writing together and editing and love. Lots of love.

We can find nourishment in many different connections – we no longer have to blame our spouses for what they cannot provide, we simply look for it elsewhere. So we each become empowered to seek whatever we need at any particular time in our life. Do remember that needs and desires are not fixed traits: as we grow and change, so do our passions and ambitions.

Skilled sluts develop very sophisticated boundaries, which might differ from one person to the next, or expand with a given person over time. Boundaries

in relationships are how we know where I end and you begin, and they tell us what we each own and are responsible for in any interaction. People with strong, clear, flexible boundaries are easy to relate to. They know how to take care of themselves, and offer the space for you to take care of yourself. Then we can care for each other in whatever ways fit the occasion.

Bad sex certainly exists. If we connect our genitals with no intention of making any personal connection, if we withhold ourselves and our feelings, if we treat our partners without respect, if we fail to honour their boundaries, if we disregard their consent, if we force sexual connection with outright assault or with bullying or emotional blackmail, we will continue to have very limited sex, and a lot of unpleasant experiences. I see sex as sacred – that means we should not profane it.

Clean Love: Can you imagine love without jealousy, without possessiveness, love cleaned of all its clinginess and desperation? Let's try. We can take some thoughts from Buddhism: What would it be like to love without attachment? Or to open our hearts to someone with no expectation beyond another heart opening in return? Loving just for the joy of it, regardless of what we might get back? (Easton and Hardy 2009:131)

Imagine a Sex-Positive Culture. How shall we evolve the nuclear family beyond the boundaries of prudery? I think it is a challenge to open our hearts and minds, as well as bodies, to really connect with others. It requires openness in spirit as well as sex. Sex is by its nature an intimate connection; we need to be willing to get vulnerable with each other. We need to develop the skills to own our vulnerabilities so that we can become compassionate both with others and with ourselves. Then we become free to open our hearts, and journey together in erotically expanded awareness.

Good sex is a profoundly altered state of consciousness, a journey into our deeper selves and our spiritual possibilities. We live in a culture whose dominant religion insists that spirituality and sexuality are antithetical – in my experience, nothing could be further from the truth. Good sex is a journey into intimacy. Sharing vulnerability generates intimacy. I recommend investing serious time and energy into sex: when we slow down and savour every part of our bodies, our sensations, and our amazing capacities for pleasure, sex becomes much more than 'getting off'. Sex at its finest is about travelling in ecstasy.

Sex Is Infinite. A fully realized sexuality can be, for all our human intents or purposes, an infinite territory for expansion and exploration: of each other, of connection, and of ourselves. Sex is so much more than just satisfying a need or releasing some pressure. Orgasm is a rich field that can be mined for many treasures; our wonderful bodies are blissfully equipped with many pathways to joyous climax. Our nervous systems provide us with a wealth of sensitive nerves and erectile tissue, many paths into our sensuality, and nearly unlimited possibilities for happy stimulus and response.

Our entire bodies are sex organs – warm skins, pulsing veins, pounding hearts, muscles that rise to meet a warm hand, hips designed to rock and reach, powerful thighs, sensitive ears and lips and tongues – even our scalps are richly innervated. Our brains light up in very special ways, switching our attention from mundane thoughts and worries into another kind of awakening that can completely immerse us in ecstasy. There is no part of us that can't experience pleasure and that does not partake of Eros.

Even more remarkable, we have the capacity to raise erotic energy, as practised in Indian and Tibetan Tantra, Native American Quodoushka, and Chinese Taoist He Qi, as the driving force that opens us into transcendent states of consciousness. We are truly amazing creatures when we discover the full range of our erotic capabilities.

Personal Growth: When we pathologize desire we cause great damage to the individual. We cage the imagination, forbid exploration of the life force, and degrade self-loving masturbation. We make everyone of us guilty of something forbidden, and give each of us something shameful to hide, while we are told, and often tell ourselves, over and over, that we are not okay.

One path to healing this epidemic of distress is to insist on the freedom to become all that we can be, in sex, in love, and in life. When we allow ourselves diverse connections, these unique intimacies provide us with remarkable opportunities to know ourselves better. Each lover provides us with an entirely individual mirror in which we can see and experience parts of ourselves we may never have noticed before, and affirm these parts as desirable and lovable. We learn yet more as we provide these intimate mirrors to each of our lovers, as seeing them in our unique way allows them to see more of themselves. A diverse sex life can empower us to be all that we can be.

We don't need to try to turn these relationships into anything except themselves: each relationship we enter into will seek its own level like water, and flow into the form that fits it, when we allow it to. Sustainable relationships need not be based on exclusive sexual attention, or, for that matter, on territoriality, or ownership, or any of the ways in which we commoditize ourselves. We each get to decide how much sustainability we are looking for in all our relationships, or in any particular one. The results for me have been amazing adventures, floods of wisdom and creativity, and a life rich in support and love.

The real purpose of sex is that sex is valuable in and of itself, for its own sake. The connections we make with people are not the purpose of sex, these are the benefits we can create when we follow our desire. We now refer to these connections as 'friends with benefits', realizing that we can include sex in our friendships, and discarding the myth that sex without coupling is doomed to be cold, distant, and disconnected.

What if the real purpose of sex is ecstasy? What if ecstasy has its rightful place in our social and personal ecologies even if it never gets us more food or

gets our sperm into the race? Neuroscientists Andrew Newberg and colleagues have this to say on the subject:

We believe, in fact, that the neurological machinery of transcendence may have arisen from the neural circuitry that evolved for mating and sexual experience. The language of mysticism hints at this connection: Mystics of all times and cultures have used the same expressive terms to describe their ineffable experiences: *bliss*, *rapture*, *ecstasy*, and *exaltation*. They speak of losing themselves in a sublime sense of union, of melting into elation, and of the total satisfactions of desires.

We believe that it is no coincidence that this is also the language of sexual pleasure. Nor is it surprising, because the very neurological structures and pathways involved in transcendent experience – including the arousal, quiescent, and limbic systems – evolved primarily to link sexual climax to the powerful sensations of orgasm.... An evolutionary perspective suggests that the neurobiology of mystical experience arose, at least in part, from the mechanism of the sexual response. (Newberg *et al.* 2001: 125–26)

What sex can be is enormous. Huge potential, massive awakenings that draw us into the present moment like nothing else, and open us to acceptance of ourselves and each other in profound ways. When we allow desire to be our teacher, and passion to fuel our journey, difference dissolves, and we participate in generating the constant stream of love that is the animating force of this universe that is our home. In this process we give birth to loving supportive connections that can bring us together into free-flowing families and tribes. Then perhaps we can envision building a future civilization firmly founded on love.

Notes

- 1 For further information, read the excellent books *The Myth of Monogamy* (Barash and Lipton 2001) and *Sex at Dawn* (Ryan and Jetha 2010).
- 2 For a view from a radically different culture, read Judith Stacey's chapter in *Unhitched*, in which she explicates how the Mosuo people of southwestern China have created family structures that entirely separate desire from domesticity.
- 3 Interview with Judith Lipton, co-author of *The Myth of Monogamy*, May 2011.
- 4 Limerence: was coined by psychologist Dorothy Tennov to describe the blindingly obsessive aspects of the state of mind we know as 'falling in love' (Tennov 1979).
- 5 For an in-depth discussion of how this can work please read *The Ethical Slut*, particularly the chapters on 'Roadmaps through Jealousy' and 'Embracing Conflict' (Easton and Hardy 2009: 108–160).

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