

Introduction

At the height of the Clinton-Lewinsky farce, Governor Roy Romer of Colorado was outed by his political opponents as having been involved in an extramarital relationship with an aide for 16 years. Governor Romer called a press conference and with his wife and adult daughter by his side explained that his family had been aware of his relationship with this woman all along and that everyone involved understood and accepted her importance to him. He said, in essence, that consensual non-monogamy was a choice which he and his loved ones were comfortable with and that it really was nobody else's concern.

What is remarkable about this is that Governor Romer, an accomplished politician, had the courage to speak his personal truth so candidly. The fact that Governor Romer's family has an unorthodox structure is not nearly so remarkable. The American family is in flux. We all know that, and are aware of the rise in single-parent families, same-sex partners in family with or without children, people who choose to live alone, and the myriad of other choices people make in defining their own families. Unitarian Universalist congregations are known for their affirmation of every individual's right to define family for themselves. The choice of consensual non-monogamy has so far been mostly below our radar, though.

Families with more than two adult members exist in our society, and have in

many cultures and in many forms for a very long time. It is an idiosyncrasy of our Western culture that the unexamined assumption of life-long monogamous heterosexual pair bonding as the "norm" has so deeply rooted itself in our psyche. Of course, the reality has always been something different from the facade. We tend to say that "the marriage failed" but maybe it's the assumptions that fail.

Debate rages as to whether humans are naturally monogamous. And while that can be an interesting conversation, the question ultimately is moot. If monogamy is our nature, we're not very good at it. Reliable numbers are hard to come by, but the frequency of extramarital affairs that people will admit to is something like 50%. The frequency with which people abandon perfectly good relationships because they have already fallen for someone else and feel they must choose is also high, though nearly impossible to quantify. This can be further complicated when the attraction is to someone of a different sex from a current partner, and the presumption is strong that one must abandon a perfectly good sexual preference identity along with the perfectly good relationship. All around you, all the time, people you know are choosing to terminate loving relationships (or equivalently, cheating on their partners) simply because they have absorbed the

notion that there can be only one special person at a time, and they give priority to that message over what their hearts are telling them.

There's another choice.

There is a growing movement of people who have embraced the notion that love is in abundant supply and that cultural trappings which separate us from the full expression of our heartfelt connections deserve, at the very least, a very critical analysis. These people believe that radical honesty is a form of love and that fidelity has to do with honoring negotiated agreements rather than with some presumed ideal. We believe that truly sustainable, committed relationship depends on embracing the paradoxical notion that only by being true to ourselves, and encouraging our loved ones to do likewise, can we be good partners. And all of these ideas together imply that when connection happens it is a family matter. The term polyamory has come into use to express this notion of loving more. The polyamory movement with which I identify is something fundamentally different from the pervasive casual free love of the sixties, or the anonymous casual sex of swinging. And it is different from the oppressive patriarchal polygyny that is many Americans' understanding of polygamy. Polyamory is about relationship, about sustainability of intimate connection, and about reclaiming the right to decide for oneself who one calls spouse (or spice).

Many polyamorists are Unitarian Universalists, and many UUs are poly. UUs are drawn together by the shared need to discover one's own theological truth rather than to accept an existing dogma. We come together to share our findings, but mostly to share our questions. Is it any wonder that some of us also reject dogma and choose to live in the questions in the sexualoving aspects of our lives? And in fact, that for some they are the same questions? Indeed, many polyamorists practice in one way or another a strong integration of their sexuality and spirituality, an integration which might be unwelcome in a religious community other than the UUA. And it's not always the case that they are welcome even here.

As UU polys have started to network and swap stories recently, it has become clear that there is a fairly strong dichotomy of attitudes among various UU congregations. Polys in Hawaii and along the West Coast and in Florida, to name a few, have been met with the kind of acceptance that our statement of principles promises. They have spoken in public fora, organized workshops, and otherwise added their voices to the proceedings of their congregations. In other settings, here in North Carolina for instance, the story has been quite different. One of the churches in my neighborhood solicited in their newsletter for workshops on "Improving Your Relationships". We proposed a workshop on responsible non-monogamy and the Adult Enrichment committee responded that they felt our topic was not

appropriate for their family-oriented programming. From where we sit, it's hard to see any topic more family-oriented.

Chances are really good that there are polyamorous people in your congregation, and they may be about peek out of their closets. I want to encourage you to simply ask yourself "Who do I want to choose my family for me?" And then reach out to someone who has already made a courageous choice for themselves.

Note: This essay was written in 2000 for World Magazine, but not selected for publication.

How can I learn more?

For more information on UUPA, including how to become a member, contact us at:

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Introduction to Polyamory for UUs



Unitarian Universalists and Responsible Non-monogamy

New Options For:

Love Family Community

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