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Opening Up to the Possibilities: Challenging Monogamy and Revolutionizing Relationships

MY LIFE'S WORK for more than a decade has been dedicated to educating and empowering people around their sexuality. I write about sex, I teach workshops and lecture about sex, I answer people's questions about sex, I demonstrate techniques for sex, I make sex-positive movies, and I produce sex events. Because of my work and my never-ending interest in all things sexual, I have witnessed and indulged in a wide variety of sexual experiences and met people from all walks of life. I've met people who are straight, queer, bi, vanilla, kinky, and just plain horny. I've made friends with leatherfolk, swingers, gender-queers, sex workers, polyamorous people, Tantra practitioners, Pagans, and sex radicals.

The first time I saw someone have sex right in front of me, I was mesmerized, awestruck, turned on. It was really cool. The 400th time, it's still cool, but it's different. I found myself less interested in the surface of what I was seeing—how he licks her, the noises she makes

when she fucks her, the way he looks when she plays with his ass, what he says when he talks dirty to him, and on and on. Instead, I was much more fascinated by who the people are. Are they a couple? How long have they been together? What made them decide to come to this sex event? What do they like about having public sex? Who is that other woman I often see making out with them both? Do they have sex with other people? I want to know what the context is for what I am watching. I want to know about the inner workings of their relationship.

And it was no wonder. As I got to know these people, I discovered that their relationships were a lot more intriguing, complex, and transgressive than their sex lives (and their sex lives were pretty amazing). In addition to sharp communication skills and a creative sense of identity, they all appeared to have one thing in common: they were all in nonmonogamous relationships. And they'd found a way to make those relationships work so well that they exuded an above-average level of sexual and emotional satisfaction—something that in my experience and observation seems to elude a lot of people. So, I wondered, just how do they do it?

The Decline of Marriage and Monogamy

Most of the world's peoples, throughout history and around the globe, have arranged things so that marriage and sexual exclusivity are not the same thing. —The Myth of Monogamy¹

It's no secret that traditional monogamous marriage in America is in serious trouble and has been for quite a while. The model of the stay-at-home wife and the husband as sole breadwinner began to change during the Industrial Revolution; it shifted significantly when women entered the workforce in record numbers during World War II. Once women began working outside the home, earning their own money

(albeit less money for the same work), exploring education and career opportunities, gender roles shifted and marriage changed. In the 1950s there was a brief return to more traditional coupling: 96 percent of people of childbearing age were married, and they got married at a younger age.² This period in what I call "*Leave It to Beaver Land*" didn't last for very long. The 1960s brought the sexual revolution, part of a counterculture movement among young people that openly questioned prevailing norms about sex and gender. Through writing, activist groups, and public demonstrations, men and women critiqued the Vietnam War, capitalism, and the nuclear family. They promoted sexual liberation and "free love" over monogamy and marriage. Along with this change in cultural ideas and social norms came a decline in marriage rates, an increase in divorce rates, and a decrease in the number of children people had.³

The activism of the sixties gave birth to the women's movement, which mobilized women and men to challenge gender roles, stereotypes, and inequality. Access to birth control and legalized abortion meant women could take charge of their reproductive choices and have sex for pleasure, not just for procreation. Feminists critiqued and rejected marriage as a patriarchal institution. In 1970, the marriage rate briefly increased, but divorce rates showed a sizable increase, too: 14.9 per 1,000 married women age 15 and older, up from 9.2 in 1960. By 1975, the marriage rate began to decline again and divorce rates continued to rise.⁴ The seventies also saw a burst of academic work on swingers and alternative relationships and the publication of over a dozen books on those subjects. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 jump-started the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, giving traditional marriage and nuclear families yet another detractor: queer people.

In the eighties, marriage rates continued to drop. Part of the decline was blamed on the rise of another form of coupling: unmarried heterosexual couples who lived together (and were given the decidedly unsexy moniker "cohabitators"). Although cohabitators weren't new,

by the eighties there were enough of them that sociologists and the US Census Bureau began to take notice. Divorce rates kept rising in the eighties until 1995, when they began to decline slightly, although not as quickly as marriage rates did. By the nineties, more gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people were coming out of the closet than ever before. They were living together, having commitment ceremonies, and raising children; the greater visibility of this community continued to redefine ideas about relationships and family.

In 2004, the marriage rate was 39.9 per 1,000 unmarried women age 15 and older, which means that in less than 50 years, the rate had dropped nearly 50 percent.³ In the same time period, rates for second, third, and fourth marriages increased, although those marriages don't necessarily fare any better: statistics show that the divorce rate for remarriages is even higher than for first marriages.⁶ Clearly, the structure, expectations, and functionality of marriage are not as desirable or functional as they were 50 years ago.

There's another significant indicator that monogamous marriages and relationships aren't working: cheating is epidemic. The Kinsey Report was the first to offer statistics on the subject from a large study published in 1953; it reported that 26 percent of wives and 50 percent of husbands had at least one affair by the time they were 40 years old. Other studies followed, with similar findings. According to the *Janus Report* of 1993, more than one-third of men and more than one-quarter of women admit to having had at least one extramarital sexual experience. Forty percent of divorced women and 45 percent of divorced men reported having had more than one extramarital sexual relationship while they were still married.⁷ In a 2007 poll conducted by MSNBC and iVillage, half of more than 70,000 respondents said they've been unfaithful at some point in their lives, and 22 percent have cheated on their current partner.⁸

While nearly anyone you ask will tell you cheating is wrong and immoral, research obviously reflects decidedly different behavior.

Having an affair has become like a shadow institution in this country: it's so ingrained in our culture that we take it for granted as inevitable. Cheating on one's partner is a pivotal plot point in countless television shows, movies, plays, operas, pop songs, and even commercials. It has become so widespread that it has spawned an entire industry of dating websites for cheaters to meet other cheaters, books and self-help programs, and private investigation services. Although publicly it's considered unacceptable, it has become an accepted part of life.

For those people who manage to avoid cheating (or being cheated on), there is still a general dissatisfaction with monogamous relationships. Complaints about being stuck in a rut abound. Everywhere you look, you are urged to "spice up" your sex life, reignite the romance, combat monotony, or bring back the spark in your relationship. The number of magazine articles, books, talk show episodes, workshops, retreats—not to mention people's individual counseling sessions—devoted to these topics is staggering.⁹ Couples therapy is a booming business. Lots of people seem pretty unhappy.

Monogamy's Mythology

Those who talk most about the blessings of marriage and the constancy of its vows are the very people who declare that if the chain were broken and the prisoners left free to choose, the whole social fabric would fly asunder. You cannot have the argument both ways. If the prisoner is happy, why lock him in? If he is not, why pretend that he is? —George Bernard Shaw¹⁰

It's no wonder people are so dissatisfied: monogamy sets most people up to fail. The rules of traditional monogamy are clear: you've vowed to be emotionally and sexually exclusive with one person forever. But it's the unspoken rules that will trip you up. We've collectively been sold a fairy tale of finding that one person with whom you'll live happily

ever after. The expectations are endless: your one-and-only is your soul mate, the person with whom you are 100 percent sexually and emotionally compatible, your "other half" with whom you share the same values about everything. He or she will fulfill all your needs—physical, emotional, psychological, affectionate, financial, romantic, sexual, and spiritual. If you are truly in love, you will never have any desire for anything from anyone else.

Some people see through this unspoken mythology, consciously reject the unreasonable expectations, decide to commit to one partner, and are satisfied. These folks *choose* monogamy and it works for them. But it is more common that people are monogamous not by choice, but by default; they believe monogamy is what everyone else is doing, what is expected, and how relationships are supposed to be. In addition, they have grown up with messages about the fairy tale, it has seeped into their consciousness, and they work hard to live up to all the hype. The problem is that those unspoken expectations of monogamy are unrealistic and unattainable.

When someone in a monogamous relationship is first confronted with a desire that contradicts the mythology, it causes a range of reactions. Perhaps you realize your partner isn't meeting all your needs. Or you find yourself attracted to someone else. At first you feel guilty because you're not supposed to have those feelings. They're supposed to be reserved for your one-and-only! If you were really in love... But you have them, and you have some options. You can recognize the feeling without shame or guilt and decide you're not going to act on it because you don't need to or want to. You will probably feel good about this decision—it is the decision made by people who've thought about monogamy and chosen it consciously. But the next three options are far more common: 1) Deny the desire: This is a coping mechanism that sends your feelings underground, where they fester, leading to resentment, anger, and disconnection from your partner. 2) Indulge the desire: Your only option here is to cheat, which leads to deception and betrayal. 3) Fulfill the desire:

You can only truly fulfill it if you end your current relationship and then start one with the new person. Serial monogamy, here we come! In actuality, there is another option. There are several, in fact. But they all require that you give up monogamy. Cheaters do at least one honest thing: they acknowledge that one partner can't meet all their needs and that they want to have sex or a relationship with someone other than their current partner. Then they fuck everything up by lying. They act on their desire with dishonesty by sneaking around, keeping secrets, and shutting down communication with their partner.

Nonmonogamy as an Alternative Choice

*If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it's yours.
If it doesn't, it never was.* —Anonymous

People who practice nonmonogamy begin from the same premise: one partner cannot meet all their needs and they may want to have sex or a relationship with someone other than their current partner. But instead of hiding it, they bring this fact out in the open. They don't stifle their behavior based on how they're supposed to act. They open the lines of communication. They talk honestly about what they want, face their fears and the fears of others, and figure out a way to pursue their desire without deception. They don't limit themselves to sharing affection, flirting, sex, connection, romance, and love with just one person. They believe strongly that you can have all these things with multiple people and do it in an ethical, responsible way.

There are no scripts or models for open relationships, so people in them must invent their partnerships by living them. When their relationships change, they are just as likely to renegotiate them to make them work as they are to end them. Because they have multiple experiences, people, and relationships in their life, they rarely get stuck in that rut that monogamous people complain about.

On the surface, it may seem that people in nonmonogamous relationships give up the comfort and security of monogamy. After all, on a regular basis they must confront one of our deepest fears—that a partner is going to leave. But they value their freedom and the freedom of their partners, and with that freedom comes, for some, a greater sense of security. It sounds like a contradiction, but one of the most profound things I have learned from people in nonmonogamous relationships is how confident and content they feel about the strength of their partnerships. One woman said she knows her partners are in a relationship because they want to be, not out of any obligation. Another told me that because her relationships aren't built on false ideas about exclusivity forever, she feels more cherished by her partners; she said, "There is an investment in what we have rather than what we should have." But all this freedom doesn't mean it's a free-for-all. Nonmonogamous folks are constantly engaged in their relationships: they negotiate and establish boundaries, respect them, test them, and, yes, even violate them. But the limits are not assumed or set by society; they are consciously chosen.

Who are these daring revolutionaries? When most people think of those with multiple partners, a few images come to mind. The cheating spouse and his mistress. Crazy swingers, wild orgies, and sex parties. Polygamous people of a foreign culture in a faraway land. But nonmonogamous people are not a strange or rare breed. They are everywhere, all around you. They belong to hip urban enclaves and they live on farms in rural America. They have high school diplomas and they have PhDs. They may have little in common in their everyday lives. What they share is the honesty and willingness to take a leap and create relationships that defy everything we've been taught.

My Research

In the past 10 years, I've studied a lot about polyamory and other forms of nonmonogamy. What always struck me, in reading books and

attending workshops, was that how-to information is helpful, but it's just a framework. I can remember attending talks on the subject and walking away feeling that I didn't know any more than I did before. Polyamory was portrayed in an idealistic way where everyone was on the same page, having tons of sex and getting along great. It made me a little suspicious.

Several years ago, while out of town, I went to dinner with a friend and a woman I knew from the area. I knew both of them were polyamorous, and we struck up a conversation about it. My friend said, "My primary partner and I don't have a sexual relationship. We have sex with our other partners. But we are 100 percent committed to one another." I was surprised, because what she was saying contradicted all the models I knew. Our companion was a very high-profile leader in the BDSM community, and she'd been with her primary partner for a long time. "Della and I became poly after she cheated on me. I was sort of dragged into polyamory nonconsensually, in other words. When I found out she cheated, I was hurt and angry, but when I cooled down, I realized I did not want to end our relationship. So, we sat down and said, 'What can we do to make this work?'"

What I realized that night, listening to their stories, was that I hadn't heard a lot of people talk about the specifics of their situations. When someone is willing to share the nitty-gritty details of their life, we can learn from their experiences. But people have to have the courage to tell the good, the bad, the ugly, the quirky, the embarrassing, so others know they are not alone.

That is why it was important to include as many different voices and versions of nonmonogamy as I could in this book. I have my own experiences with open relationships, both successful and unsuccessful. I've tried many different styles of nonmonogamy. I have been in my current open relationship for seven years. But I think it's useful to get as many different perspectives as possible about such a broad topic. So I turned to the people I knew who were coloring outside the lines of monogamy.

I created a written questionnaire and emailed it to personal contacts and leaders of local polyamory groups. In addition, I posted information about the questionnaire in online forums and encouraged people to forward and distribute the posting to others. It's a self-selecting group of people, or what researchers call a "snowball sample": I send the interview to people, they send it to partners and friends, and so on, like a chain letter. I'm not a sociologist—this is not a scientific study, and the participants are not a random sample—but the information is valuable nonetheless, especially since there is so little research about people in open relationships.

In total, I collected information from 126 respondents. I received written questionnaires from 121 of them. I did follow-up interviews with 80: 38 of them in person, 20 via email, and 22 by telephone. (Five of the 38 in-person interviewees did not complete the written questionnaire in advance; I collected their demographic information during the course of the interview.)

My study included 66 women, 50 men, and 10 people who identified as transgender or "other." Thirty-eight percent identified as bisexual, bi/queer, bi/straight, or bi/pansexual. Thirty-seven percent identified as straight or straight/bi; 19 percent as gay, lesbian, or queer; and 6 percent as pansexual or omnisexual. The youngest person was 21, the oldest was 72, and the average age was 37. The majority of respondents were white (about 80 percent). People came from 28 states and were pretty equally divided across the US: 30 percent from the South, 29 percent from the Northeast, 20 percent from the West, and 19 percent from the Midwest. Two participants were from Canada. The group included a food-service worker, a cosmetic sales representative, a Gaming Commission officer, a state tax auditor, a porn performer, an enlisted member of the Army, and a minister. The most common occupation was teaching, with six elementary, middle, and high school teachers and four professors. In some cases, I interviewed both partners of a couple or all members of a triad; in

others, I obtained information from only one member, reflecting just that person's perspective of the relationship.

Reading Opening Up

This book is a window into the world of possibilities beyond monogamy. It's a study and a road map, a guidebook and a manifesto. Just by picking it up, you show some interest in the topic. Maybe you are curious about or considering an open relationship. Perhaps you have been polyamorous for most of your life and you're looking for advice about how to actively support your open relationship. You might be the loved one of a person in an open relationship who wants to better understand nonmonogamy, or a member of a helping profession (a doctor, therapist, or social worker) who needs to better understand it. I hope there is something useful here for all of you.

I had an important epiphany while putting this book together: there is no formula for an open relationship. Everyone does nonmonogamy differently. Each story and each relationship is unique. There are similarities and patterns, but no one does it exactly the same as anyone else. Consider the observations and advice in this book a guide for creating open relationships and making them work. Learn from the people I interviewed, who share their clarity and confusion, their heartbreak and joy, their struggles and success stories. Take it all in as you design your relationships, and remember: life is in the details.

The first section of the book is an introduction to open relationships. In Chapter 1, I cover a brief history of different forms of nonmonogamy since the 1950s and define important terms that are used throughout the book. Chapter 2 exposes and corrects myths about nonmonogamy. Why people choose open relationships is the subject of Chapter 3, and some of the principles that make them work are outlined in Chapter 4. The second section, Chapters 5 through 10, describes various styles of open relationships, including partnered

nonmonogamy, swinging, polyamory, solo polyamory, polyfidelity, and mono/poly combinations. Beginning with Chapter 5 and continuing through Chapter 17, there is a more detailed look at one (or several) of the subjects I interviewed at the end of each chapter.

The third section of the book is your road map to creating and sustaining open relationships. Chapter 11 offers guidelines and exercises to help you design your ideal relationship. In Chapter 12, I dig into jealousy and its many companions, including envy, insecurity, possessiveness, and resentment. Chapter 13 delves into the concept of *compersion*, which has been called the opposite of jealousy. Some of the common challenges and conflicts people in open relationships must deal with—what happens when a partner gets into a new relationship, time management, miscommunication, and agreement violations—are explored in Chapter 14. Coping with change is the focus of Chapter 15. In Chapter 16, I examine the ways people in nonmonogamous relationships interact with the world: coming out (or not), finding community, and creating support networks. Chapter 17 is concerned with the unique issues people in open relationships face when raising children. Information about safer sex and sexual health is discussed in Chapter 18, and Chapter 19 deals with legal and practical issues.

In Chapter 20, I look toward the future of relationships and share words of advice from my interviewees. At the end of the book are some useful appendixes, including the endnotes, detailed information and statistics about my research subjects, and a Resource Guide. The Resource Guide includes recommended books as well as one of the most comprehensive compilations of national and local organizations, publications, events, websites, and online communities.

I chose the title *Opening Up* because I like all that it implies about people in open relationships. They're open to suggestion. Open to interpretation. Open to possibilities. Their desires aren't guarded, but out in the open. These people make room in their beds, lives, and

hearts for other people. To those who explore the possibilities beyond monogamy, opening up is about expanding and evolving. Everyone I interviewed opened up to me. Some of them were content and settled, while others were at a crossroads in their relationship, with uncertainty ahead of them. They all shared their worries, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. Their stories touched my life in innumerable ways, and I hope they touch yours on your journey toward opening up.

Tristan Taormino

Chapter 1

Pilots, Parties, and Polyamory: A Brief History

THE PRACTICE OF conducting consensual multiple sex and love relationships simultaneously is not new. As long as people have been in relationships, there have been open relationships. From swinging and open marriage to gay and lesbian sex spaces and communes, a look at models from recent history provides a context for today's open relationships.

Swinging

In the United States, swinging was the first organized form of modern nonmonogamy for heterosexual and bisexual people. Swinging began as a hidden subculture, so its history is hard to track, but there is speculation about its beginnings. Organized parties where people had sex with one another date from the 1930s and 1940s in Hollywood. One theory is that swinging began among Air Force fighter pilots and their wives during World War II. Pilots moved their wives close to base, where a tight-knit community of pilots and wives formed. Because so many pilots died in combat, it was understood that surviving pilots would care for widows as they would their own wives. This practice

supposedly continued through the Korean War. A slightly different theory is that swinging began on military bases in California in the 1950s. Neither theory has been well documented or verified. We do know that in the late 1950s the media reported on a new phenomenon in the suburbs called "wife swapping." There is also much folklore about "key parties" in the sixties and seventies—where the husbands placed their keys in a bowl and each wife picked a set and had sex with whomever they belonged to. Another theory is that swinging began among hippies and nudists, and some people point to the Sexual Freedom League, a liberal activist group founded in 1960s Berkeley which held orgy parties.¹

By the mid- to late sixties, swinger groups formed and swing parties moved out of the underground, becoming popular among mainly white, affluent heterosexual couples who lived in the suburbs, and the parties were no longer so secretive that they couldn't be found. For their 1964 book *Swap Clubs*,² William and Jerrye Breedlove talked to 800 people who belonged to swinger groups in more than 25 cities in nearly every region of the United States. The Breedloves' study was part of a surge of sociological research on swingers in the late sixties and seventies. Academics' fascination with swinging resulted in dozens of journal articles and books such as *Open Marriage*, by Nena and George O'Neill, *Group Marriage*, by Larry and Joan Constantine, *Beyond Monogamy*, edited by James R. Smith and Lynn G. Smith, and Ronald Mazur's *The New Intimacy: Open-Ended Marriage and Alternative Lifestyles*. Swingers themselves chimed in, writing several self-help style handbooks, including *Together Sex* and *The Civilized Couple's Guide to Extramarital Adventure*.

In 1969, Robert and Geri McGinley founded a weekly social group for swingers that eventually became the Lifestyles Organization, one of the oldest and largest swinger organizations in the country. The organization produced the first Lifestyles Convention in 1973, and by the 1980s Lifestyles Conventions were attracting over 1,000 couples.

In the late 1970s, Robert McGinley created the North American Swing Club Association (NASCA), a trade organization for swing clubs; today hundreds of swinger-related businesses belong to NASCA, which has become an international organization.³

Since the 1960s, various researchers have estimated the number of people who swing at between 1 and 8 million. In the late 1990s, McGinley estimated that there were about 3 million swingers in the US based on the number of clubs, roster of club memberships, attendance at parties, and samples of private parties in selected cities.⁴ Today, swingers are a large, organized subculture with their own magazines, websites, clubs, parties, and conventions. They routinely "take over" entire hotels and resorts for their events.

Utopian Swingers

Among academics who wrote about swingers in the late sixties and seventies, sociologist Carolyn Symonds was the first to classify swingers as either "recreational" or "utopian." She described recreational swingers as "persons who use swinging as a form of recreation... It might fill needs for socializing, exercise, or perhaps sexual variety or conquest." She identified utopian swingers as a much smaller group of "philosophical utopians who dream of forming a community and living all aspects of their lives in that environment. They want to share not only sex with their fellow communitarians but also provision for food and shelter, childrearing, education, and other areas of living."⁵ Other researchers of that period went on to adopt, critique, and reject the terms. What is most useful about Symonds's classification is that she identified a small subset of people who differed from the majority, one that was more politicized and not threatened by the development of additional love relationships. The utopian swinger sounds very much like an early prototype of the polyamorous person.

Open Marriage

In 1972, when most discussions about nonmonogamy concerned swinging, Nena and George O'Neill proposed a new relationship model that could include nonmonogamy. Their book *Open Marriage: A New Life Style for Couples*, based on interviews they conducted as well as their own personal philosophies, sold over 1.5 million copies. The O'Neills summarized their vision for an open marriage:

Open marriage thus can be defined as a relationship in which the partners are committed to their own and to each other's growth. It is an honest and open relationship of intimacy and self-disclosure based on the equal freedom and identity of both partners. Supportive caring and increasing security in individual identities make possible the sharing of self-growth with a meaningful other who encourages and anticipates his own and his mate's growth. It is a relationship that is flexible enough to allow for change and that is constantly being renegotiated in the light of changing needs, consensus in decision-making, acceptance and encouragement of individual growth, and openness to new possibilities for growth.⁶

Employing some of the trends of the self-help movement of the time, the O'Neills put forth a new concept of marriage where spouses rejected rigid roles, emphasized open and honest communication, and pursued freedom. They envisioned open marriage as a tool for personal growth (as evidenced by their use of the word *growth* five times in the brief description above). After the book was published, the O'Neills attempted to deemphasize the issue of sexual nonmonogamy, yet the term *open marriage* became synonymous with a sexually open marriage.

Multilateral Marriage

In 1973, husband and wife Larry and Joan Constantine coined the term *multilateral marriage* in their groundbreaking book *Group Marriage: A Study of Contemporary Multilateral Marriage*. Spurred by their own experience and interest in group marriage, the Constantines decided to begin a study of people in group marriages. Without conventional credentials—they were not sociologists or therapists, though Larry Constantine was studying for a Certificate in Family Therapy at the Boston Family Institute—they set out to locate people living in group marriages and conduct detailed interviews with them by mail and in person. They found subjects through underground networks, hard-to-find support groups, and word of mouth, and as their study got under way, subjects began contacting them. For three years, they mailed interviews to people and traveled around the country to interview them in person, driving 32,000 miles in their Volkswagen Squareback with a trailer in tow. In total, there were 104 participants in the study.

The Constantines defined multilateral marriage as a relationship that “consists of three or more partners, each of whom considers himself/herself to be married,” intending to distinguish it from the term *group marriage*, which referred to a four-person marriage between two men and two women.⁷ They were among the first (if not the first) to use the terms *cowife* and *cohusband* to describe the relationships between partners within a multilateral marriage. They studied a fairly diverse group of people (though gays and lesbians are absent from their research—it was the 70s, and finding straight groups proved difficult enough) and made astute observations about them. Multilateral marriage was the prototype of modern polyfidelity, a style of polyamory.

Gay Bathhouses and Sex Clubs

Swinging, open marriage, and multilateral marriage were the first forms of organized, documented nonmonogamy for heterosexuals. Public, recreational, and multipartner sex among gay men has been traced back to before swinging. Gay historian Allan Bérubé writes, "Before there were any openly gay or lesbian leaders, political clubs, books, films, newspapers, businesses, neighborhoods, churches, or legally recognized gay rights, several generations of pioneers spontaneously created gay bathhouses."⁹ In the late 19th and early 20th century, in addition to places like parks, YMCAs, and public restrooms, Turkish baths and other public baths in major cities became sites where men had sex with other men. From the 1920s to the 1950s, certain bathhouses developed a strong gay following and became relatively safe spaces where men could meet, socialize, and have anonymous, casual, or no-strings-attached sex with other men, often in private cubbies or rooms. During the 1950s, the first bathhouses openly marketed to a gay clientele opened in San Francisco and New York, marking the first time public gay male sex was organized and community-based. In the 1960s, in response to the "free love" movement of the era, bathhouses began installing orgy rooms for group sex.⁹ By the seventies, gay male sex, fisting, and S/M clubs were being founded in San Francisco, New York, and other cities.

When gay male culture was underground and criminalized, bathhouses and bars were among the few places for men to meet each other. Yet after being gay became more accepted and a visible gay community emerged, bathhouses remained—and to this day still remain—an important, thriving part of gay male culture. Bathhouses exist all over the country and are frequented by single men, partnered men, and couples who go together. The presence of bathhouses and their longevity in gay culture represents how casual sex and nonmonogamy (both consensual and not) have been part of gay communities.

In her essay about the infamous San Francisco fisting and S/M club the Catacombs, Gayle Rubin refers to the underlying relationships formed through public sex spaces: "Places devoted to sex are usually depicted as harsh, alienated, scary environments, where people have only the most utilitarian and exploitative relationships. The Catacombs could not have been more different... It was a sexually organized environment where people treated each other with mutual respect, and where they were lovingly sexual without being in holy wedlock."¹⁰ Jack Fritscher echoes Rubin's sentiments in his recollection of some of the nontraditional relationships that came out of the Catacombs:

I think particularly of Cynthia Slater, the founder of the Janus Society, with whom I played Top many times at the Catacombs—which was interesting because outside the Catacombs, Cynthia was herself conducting a sexual affair with my brother (yes, my real actual straight brother), just as she was being photographed by my bicoastal lover, Robert Mapplethorpe, to whom I introduced her. Cynthia liked my brother, because he was straight and he could fuck her while I could Top her in S/M, so she got two very similar guys in, like, one huge experience. Oh, fuck it: she, he, and I—it was soooo 70s! So "Twosies beats onesies, but nothing beats threes" from *Cabaret*.¹¹

In addition to public and multipartner sex, other kinds of nonmonogamy among gay men are quite common. As the community and culture evolved, gay men, especially those interested in S/M and public sex, were already renegades of mainstream society, and it seems only logical that they would forge new relationship styles rather than sticking to straight, monogamous ones.

Lesbian Collectives and Sex Wars

During the women's movement of the 1970s, all-women (and specifically all-lesbian) cooperative living situations were born. Women sought to create lives free of sexism and other forms of oppression in alternative utopias where they shared childrearing duties, living space, and resources. Part of the communal philosophy was to envision and bring to life nonpatriarchal models, including those for sex and relationships. In her account of living in one such collective in Oregon, Thyme S. Siegel writes about these emerging villages: "Emerald City's Matriarchal Village was one place among many, on country land and in college towns of the 1970s, where lesbian villages emerged. Most of these villages were characterized by various sorts of 'nonmonogamy,' harmonious and not."¹²

In the late seventies and eighties, as gay male sex and S/M clubs emerged in urban areas, women were allowed into these clubs in rare cases (as at the Catacombs in San Francisco). Lesbian and bisexual women began to "borrow" these spaces for their own parties, and eventually lesbian sex and S/M events happened on a regular basis both at clubs and private parties; this created a physical space for communities to begin to coalesce—communities of women interested in power play, public and multipartner sex, and alternative relationship structures. The lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs* debuted in 1984; in addition to explicit photography, one issue contained an essay on group sex by then editor Susie Bright. During the sex wars of the 1980s, while anti-S/M lesbian feminists and lesbian feminist sex radicals found themselves on opposite sides of arguments about sex, porn, and sadomasochism, some of them did agree on one thing: monogamy should not be assumed or necessarily embraced.

The 1990s and early 2000s brought a surge of writing by queer women about nontraditional sexuality and relationships, including *Lesbian Polyfidelity*, by Celeste West; *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader*,

edited by Marcia Munson and Judith P. Stelbourn; writing by Pat Califia, Susie Bright, Shar Rednour, and Carol Queen; essays in *Bi Any Other Name* and *Coming to Power: A Leatherdyke Reader*; as well as dozens of erotica anthologies. In her 1996 book *Lesbian Polyfidelity*, Celeste West reported that 20 percent of her lesbian respondents were polyamorous.

Polyamory

Some sources state that the word *polyamory* may have roots as far back as the 1960s. The concept and basic principles of consensual, responsible nonmonogamy emerged before the term *polyamory* was actually coined. As swinger and gay and lesbian communities thrived in California in the seventies, a different form of nonmonogamy emerged in San Francisco: utopian communes. One of the best known is the Kerista Commune (also known as Kerista Village), which began to take shape amid the free love and hippie movements of the era. The Kerista Commune was a community founded in the early to mid-seventies by Jud Presmont. Keristans coined the term *polyfidelity* (faithful to many partners) to describe this new relationship form in which each woman in the group had a sexual and love relationship with each man, complete with a "balanced rotational sleeping schedule" that determined who slept with whom; no one had sex or relationships outside the group. The number of Kerista members varied from about eight to as many as 30, and each member agreed to a social contract that included hundreds of points. They eventually formed a profitable computer business together. At its height, Kerista was a model of a new consensual, conscious, multipartner relationship style. Kerista officially disbanded in 1991.¹³

In 1984, Ryam Nearing published the first issue of *Loving More*, a newsletter dedicated to the exploration of consensual multiple loving relationships; in the eighties, Nearing also began organizing conferences

for people who were exploring those relationships. At the time, the articles that appeared in *Loving More* used terms like *polyfidelity*, *open relationships*, and *intimate networks*, but many of the ideas discussed were precursors to polyamory. In 1991, *Loving More* became a magazine cofounded by Nearing and Deborah Taj Anapol.¹⁴

People began identifying themselves as polyamorous, and the concept of polyamorous relationships and communities first emerged, in the 1990s. The term *polyamory* has been attributed to two sources. In a 1990 article titled "A Bouquet of Lovers: Strategies for Responsible Open Relationships," Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart used the term *poly-amorous* to describe a lifestyle of multiple partners, though she uses *polygamy* (not *polyamory*) as the noun. In 1992, Jennifer West created the Usenet newsgroup *alt.polyamory*.¹⁵

The nineties produced several important contributions to defining and understanding polyamory. Five books on the subject were published, including Ryam Nearing's *Loving More: The Polyfidelity Primer* and Deborah Taj Anapol's *Love Without Limits. The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*, by Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt (a pseudonym for Janet Hardy), is arguably the most influential one, considered by many to be the bible of polyamory. It was published in 1997, has been cited in hundreds of other works on polyamory, and, incidentally, was mentioned by at least 80 percent of my interviewees in the course of discussing how they first came to learn about polyamory. In the next decade, as the Internet grew in popularity, poly people found many ways to connect with one another online.

Today, there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of local and national organizations, support groups, Listservs, and online communities, plus conferences, events, and websites dedicated to polyamory. (See the Resource Guide.) There has not been enough research on polyamorous people to produce many meaningful statistics about the number of people currently or formerly in some kind of consensual nonmonogamous relationship. In their 1983 study, Philip Blumstein and Pepper

Schwartz reported that of 3,574 couples in their sample, 15 percent of married couples had "an understanding that allows nonmonogamy under some circumstances." Those percentages were higher among cohabiting couples (28 percent), lesbian couples (29 percent), and gay male couples (65 percent).¹⁶ The Janus Report sampled 1,800 people (1993), 21 percent of whom said they participated in open marriage.¹⁷ In a much smaller 2004 study of 217 bisexual people, E. H. Page found that 33 percent were involved in a polyamorous relationship and 54 percent considered polyamory ideal.¹⁸ In 2007, when Oprah.com conducted a survey of over 14,000 people, 21 percent said they were in an open marriage.¹⁹

Chapter 2

Myths about Nonmonogamy

FROM RELIGION AND RHETORIC to pundits and punch lines, misconceptions about nonmonogamy are everywhere in our society, making them hard to escape and easy to internalize. It is important to expose and correct misinformed, negative mythology to gain a better understanding of what nonmonogamy really is and what it's not before you can fairly consider all your relationship options. Exposing the bias behind the myths and revealing the facts can also help you respond to criticism from others.

Human beings were meant to be monogamous; like other animals, it's how we bond and mate.

In their book *The Myth of Monogamy: Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People*, David P. Barash and Judith Eve Lipton argue just the opposite: "In attempting to maintain a social and sexual bond consisting exclusively of one man and one woman, aspiring monogamists are going against some of the deepest-seated evolutionary inclinations with which biology has endowed most creatures, *Homo sapiens* included."¹ It's well documented that most animal species are actually not monogamous. Out of

4,000 species, only a few dozen choose one mate, have sex with only that mate, and stay with that mate until one or both die(s).²

Open relationships are unnatural, abnormal, and immoral.

This myth is based on the notion that monogamy is natural, normal, and moral, and any relationship style that isn't monogamous is wrong. As a society, we establish certain norms that change over time. These norms are reinforced by institutions, including religion, government, and the media. Our "nature" to be nonmonogamous has been documented by science (see previous myth). What is normal is always open to debate. As for what is moral, unfortunately, religious conservatives have a stranglehold on morality in this country. Our morality is supposed to guide us to determine what's right and wrong. In my book, what's right is following your heart and creating honest, ethical relationships that work for you.

Polyamory is what Mormons practice.

Polygamy, a term used by academics, anthropologists, and researchers primarily for classification purposes, is the practice of one person having multiple spouses or partners. It exists in three forms: polygyny, polyandry, and group marriage. *Polygyny* is the practice of one man having several wives or female partners; *polyandry* is the practice of one woman having multiple husbands or male partners; *group marriage* is a combination of polygyny and polyandry.

In the United States, polygamy is most closely associated with Mormonism. Beginning in the 1830s, the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, preached and practiced plural marriage as an integral part of the Mormon faith. Smith's successor Brigham Young continued to promote plural marriage. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officially outlawed polygamy in 1890. Today, according to the leadership of the church, only certain fundamentalist sects of Mormonism teach polygamy as central to the religion and

continue to practice it. What they practice is actually polygyny (one man with multiple wives), though it is most often referred to as polygamy or plural marriage. According to an informal survey reported in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, there are 37,000 Mormon fundamentalists in the United States, and about half live in polygamous relationships.³

The most controversial issue associated with the practice of polygamy by Mormon fundamentalists is the issue of consent. Many Mormon ex-polygamists have made claims of coercion, kidnapping, brainwashing, incest, and abuse, especially of young women who are married to much older men without their consent. There are non-Mormons who practice consensual multipartner relationships that fit the literal definition of polygamy; however, they usually call themselves *polyamorous* or *polyfidelitous*.

People in open relationships have psychological problems.

Research based on standard psychological testing has shown that people in nonmonogamous relationships are no more or less dysfunctional, narcissistic, neurotic, pathological, psychotic, or generally fucked up than people in monogamous relationships.⁴ This doesn't mean people in open relationships are all well-adjusted and psychologically healthy. It just means that there's no difference between monogamous and non-monogamous people when it comes this stuff. However, one study showed that an individual in an open relationship tends to be "individualistic, an academic achiever, creative, nonconforming, stimulated by complexity and chaos, inventive, relatively unconventional and indifferent to what others said, concerned about his/her own personal values and ethical systems, and willing to take risks to explore possibilities."⁵ Because open relationships require well-developed relationship skills, people in them tend to have more self-awareness, better communication skills, and a better sense of self.

People in open relationships have intimacy issues and trouble with commitment.

The assumption underlying this myth is that true intimacy can only be achieved between two people in a monogamous relationship. In other words, if you are emotionally and physically intimate with more than one person, it somehow "dilutes" the intimacy of each relationship. This is based on the notion that love is a quantifiable thing: If you have 100 pounds of love, you can give 100 pounds to your partner, but if you have multiple partners, you have to split the 100 pounds between them. Intimacy is about being willing to be open, honest, and vulnerable with your partner and bonding on a deep level. Monogamy does not automatically foster intimacy in a relationship, any more than nonmonogamy fosters a lack of intimacy. Furthermore, nonmonogamous relationships often involve the same level of commitment as monogamous ones. People in nonmonogamous relationships are not avoiding intimacy or commitment, they are cultivating a relationship style that meets their needs and works for them.

If you're nonmonogamous, it's because you are confused and indecisive.

This myth goes along with the previous one, the idea that nonmonogamous people cannot commit to one person or choose between them. It's quite the opposite: most nonmonogamous people are very clear about why they choose nonmonogamy and what they want and need out of their relationships. And it's not that they *can't* choose between partners, it's that they don't want to and believe strongly that they don't have to.

Polyamory is just a fancy term for promiscuity.

While a polyamorous person may have several lovers, polyamory is not simply all about sex. Polyamorous relationships may encompass friendship, companionship, support, camaraderie, love, intimacy,

connection, commitment. All that said, having an active sex life with more than one person isn't a bad thing.

Nonmonogamy is physically dangerous; you're more likely to get diseases because you have multiple partners.

Having multiple sexual partners at the same time does not automatically put you at greater risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Having unprotected sex with an individual infected with an STI or an individual whose STI status you do not know puts you at greater risk for contracting an STI. There is no evidence that nonmonogamous people have a higher rate of STIs than monogamous people. Furthermore, every person I interviewed cited safer sex as one of the main rules of their open relationships.

Nonmonogamy is no different from cheating.

Cheating involves lying, deception, and breaking a commitment previously made. For nonmonogamy to be successful, everyone must tell the truth and respect the rules agreed upon. Consensual nonmonogamy means that all parties involved have agreed to the arrangement.

Polyamory is an unhealthy environment in which to raise kids.

Children need parents and other adults in their lives who are committed to raising them with love, support, respect, and understanding. Although conservatives want us to believe that the heterosexual nuclear family is the best environment in which to raise children, that family unit has been shown over and over to be as dysfunctional as any other type of family—if not more so. Today, plenty of children are raised by so-called nontraditional families consisting of one mother, two mothers, one father, two fathers, two divorced parents, one or more stepparents, a grandparent, or some combination thereof. The important thing is for children to have stability and for parents to be honest with them about their relationships.

Chapter 4

What Makes an Open Relationship Work?

PEOPLE WHO PRACTICE NONMONOGAMY are a truly diverse bunch and they design their relationships in many different ways. Yet, there are some key emotional skills they have in common, qualities that help them to negotiate and nurture their relationships. If you don't have a clear idea of who you are or what you want, or you feel insecure about yourself and your relationship, it will likely be difficult for you to navigate through nonmonogamy. Engaging in self-reflection, processing your feelings with other people, and being willing to deal with conflict are necessary skills to create alternatives to monogamy. As you continue to ponder whether an open relationship is right for you, consider some of the significant elements that help make these relationships work: consent, self-discovery and self-awareness, communication, honesty, boundaries, trust, fidelity, and commitment.

Consent

I begin with consent because it is a foundational element for all relationships and one of the significant qualities that distinguish nonmonogamy from cheating. To ensure a healthy, positive, fulfilling open relationship,

everyone involved must be on board. No one should feel pressured, coerced, or otherwise pushed to be in a relationship they don't want to be in. You should not open up a monogamous relationship or begin a non-monogamous one to please someone else, avoid conflict, or give in to a demand, or because you fear the relationship might otherwise end. Do it because you know what you're getting into and you want to get into it.

It would be unwise to agree to nonmonogamy for the following reasons or with these hidden motives:

- You're so in love with the person that while your gut is telling you no, you decide to say yes and will deal with it later.
- You believe your partner likes the idea as an abstract concept, but it won't actually happen.
- You agree to it, but secretly know you'll be "enough" for your partner and she won't ever want anyone else.
- Although your partner has said he is nonmonogamous by nature, you know you can change him.
- You think it's just a phase and she'll get over it.

Be honest with yourself about what the realities of nonmonogamy are to assess whether it's right for you. If you or a partner aren't sure, or need to work out what you need to feel sure, don't rush it. Do some research and weigh your options. Wait until everyone gets to "yes," even if it means waiting longer than you'd like. Be sure to be very clear about what you or your partner are saying "yes" to. Is your partner agreeing to further discussion, a trial run, or additional partners? You want to hear a thoughtful, well-informed "yes" so everyone feels comfortable moving forward.

Self-awareness

A strong sense of self is key in all relationships and it should be a starting point for people considering an open relationship. Until you are

clear about who you are, what is important to you, and what you need and want, communicating with others can only go so far. Certainly, you don't need to have it *all* figured out before you begin talking. In fact, it often helps people clarify their thoughts and desires by hashing them out with someone else or getting an outsider's opinion. But the more clarity you have about your wishes, your issues, and your goals, the more you bring to the communication process.

Anita Wagner, a polyamory educator and cofounder of the Chesapeake Polyamory Network, likens self-awareness to emotional intelligence, a concept popularized by the book *Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman. Anita says:

What emotional intelligence means for me is understanding my own emotional wiring. For example, someone who has abandonment or serious self-esteem issues needs to be aware of it. They need to know those issues are going to make them especially vulnerable in succeeding in poly relationships. If they're not working on them and getting a pretty big handle on them, the first time their sweetheart goes out to be with someone else, that abandonment button will get pushed big time. It's hard enough for those of us who are okay in those areas... The more emotional intelligence we have, the easier it will be to withstand emotional challenges.'

One thing that came through strongly in my interviews is that there aren't a lot of nonmonogamous people wandering through life with their heads down, just following the crowd. The people I talked to are actively engaged in their own personal growth and the growth of their relationships. They expressed a strong interest in knowing themselves (and others) on a deep level. They seek that self-knowledge through a variety of practices, including psychotherapy and counseling, reading, writing, journaling, blogging, attending workshops and peer support groups, meditation, and various spiritual practices. This

isn't to say that all nonmonogamous people have a greater consciousness than others (my interviewees were a self-selected bunch), but by doing work on themselves, they are better equipped to be in complex nontraditional relationships.

Society has prescribed certain expectations when it comes to love and sexual relationships: what a relationship *should* look like, how each person *should* behave (and these behaviors are usually dictated by traditional gender roles), how long you *should* see each other before becoming serious, how often you *should* spend time together, how you *should* express your love and affection for one another. There are rigid ideas about all these things and more, beginning with the most obvious one: that a love relationship happens between two (and only two) people who have sex and an emotional attachment. Within our monogamy-centered culture, fidelity is defined as sexual and emotional exclusivity with one person. These values and many others are continually reinforced all around us—through traditional wedding ceremonies, men's and women's magazines, talk shows, and mainstream books and movies. I challenge you to throw all of that stuff away and begin from scratch. It may seem like a daunting project, but until you let go of what you think you're supposed to believe and how you're supposed to act, you cannot figure out what encompasses your ideal relationship(s). (See sidebar for a helpful exercise.)

Communication

Once you've done some self-reflection about where you are coming from, it's time to open up the discussion. Ask anyone in an open relationship what makes it work, and one word comes up the most often: communication. Obviously, communication is a critical part of any kind of relationship, but when it comes to nonmonogamous relationships, good communication is one of the most important skills you can have. Nonmonogamy is not for the faint of heart or lazy: be prepared

EXERCISE

Creating Authentic Relationships

The questions below deal with issues most people take for granted and let society define for them. You can start with a blank canvas and create your own definitions.

- How do you define intimacy and closeness?
- What constitutes a relationship for you?
- Are there different types of relationships you wish you could have?
- How long should a significant relationship last?
- What is sex? Is it intercourse? Is it more specific: penis-in-vagina or penis-in-ass intercourse? What about manual stimulation and penetration, oral sex, sex toys, BDSM play?
- What kinds of things do you consider intimate? Sex, sexual touch, genital contact, a BDSM scene with no sexual aspect?
- Must you live near a partner for a relationship to be important?
- How do you define fidelity?
- What constitutes loving, affectionate, sexual, and romantic behavior? Where do things like flirting, kissing, love letters, gift giving, dating, courting, phone calls, emails, and instant messages fit into your definitions?
- What does commitment mean to you? How do you define a committed relationship?
- What are the most important things you need in a relationship?
- How important is it for you to live with a partner?
- Realistically, how much time and energy do you have to give to a relationship?

to talk things through, listen with compassion, and process your feelings and your partners' feelings. If this sounds tedious or impossible to you, then you might want to reconsider your relationship style, because talking is a fundamental element of making nonmonogamy work. A lot of people I interviewed said that talking about their feelings makes them feel better. Talking about your feelings can reassure you and your partner(s) and help you better understand a situation, which puts you in a better position to resolve a problem, let it go, and move on.

You will have many conversations, each with its own tone, focus, and goals. Here are some examples of moments that are ripe for a conversation:

- Introducing the idea of having an open relationship
- Designing and negotiating the details of your open relationship
- Checking in when something or someone new comes into the picture
- Checking in and debriefing after a party, date, or play session
- Talking it through when one of you is unhappy or experiencing intense feelings
- Dealing with a conflict and working toward a solution
- Redesigning and renegotiating the details of your open relationship

While each of these discussions will proceed differently, there are general guidelines for good communication. All communication should encompass thoughtful self-assessment, honesty, mutual nonjudgmental support, respect, compassionate listening, and a willingness to compromise if necessary. Set aside time to talk, and go into it with the intent that this will not be a short, breezy conversation or a one-shot deal. Communication must be thorough and must be ongoing. Have reasonable expectations: you may not agree with one another right off the bat, and you may not come to a resolution in just one conversation.

Know going into it that talking about relationships, love, sex, and feelings is difficult and emotionally charged for most people.

If one partner is introducing the idea of an open relationship, the initiator should approach the subject gently. Test the water with something general like "Did you hear that Oprah talked about open marriage on her show? What do you think of that?" rather than something confrontational like "I want to open up our marriage and need you to be on board." Give your partner time and space to respond; remember, you may have been thinking about the topic for a year, but this may be the first time it has occurred to him.

If you are the partner receiving the suggestion, keep an open mind. Listen to your partner without criticism or judgment. Resist the impulse to doubt yourself or to buy into the monogamy myth with thoughts like *Why does she want an open relationship? What about me isn't enough?* If you're both interested, keep talking. Do some reading and research. For tips on negotiating your relationship, check out Chapter 11, *Designing Your Open Relationship*.

If the conversation is about one partner's jealousy or other intense feelings, your first goal should be to listen. Reassure her of your commitment to the relationship. At the moment when a partner is having intense feelings such as hurt, insecurity, jealousy, or betrayal, acknowledge those feelings, validate and respect them, even if you *don't understand them*. Don't try to talk anyone out of how they're feeling with rational arguments; telling them why they shouldn't feel a certain way will get you nowhere. A more objective opinion and reassurances about what's going on from your perspective can come later.

If a conflict has spurred the conversation, the same rule applies: first listen. Practice patience and compassion, and remember that you are on the same team. Don't attempt to defend your position, argue a point, or come to an agreement. Just listen. Remind one another of your love, affection, and respect. Share your side of the situation, remembering to take responsibility for your feelings and your actions.

Tell each other what you need to resolve the problem. Be prepared to compromise if necessary. It may be helpful to read ahead to Chapter 12, Jealousy and Other Intense Feelings, and Chapter 14, Common Challenges and Problems.

Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a communication technique created by clinical psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg and outlined in his book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*; the concept has since been adapted all over the world. It can be an effective tool for every kind of communication, especially in your relationships. Many of the people I interviewed said they employ the techniques of Nonviolent Communication as they talk about and negotiate their open relationships. Rosenberg has written dozens of books about NVC, as have others; it is a broad topic. The basic concept of NVC is this:

Most of us have been educated from birth to compete, judge, demand and diagnose—to think and communicate in terms of what is “right” and “wrong” with people. We express our feelings in terms of what another person has “done to us,” instead of a feeling independent of another person. We mix up our basic human needs with the strategies we’re using to meet those needs (we say “I want you to spend more time with me,” instead of “I’m really needing companionship”). And, we ask for what we’d like using demands, the threat of punishment, guilt, or even the promise of rewards.²

NVC works by retraining people in how to listen, talk, and express their needs:

NVC guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of being habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on an

awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others a respectful and empathic attention. In any exchange, we come to hear our own deeper needs and those of others. NVC trains us to observe carefully, and to be able to specify behaviors and conditions that are affecting us. We learn to identify and clearly articulate what we are concretely wanting in a given situation.³

These are some of the tools of NVC:

- Listening with compassion instead of becoming defensive, attacking, or disconnecting
- Learning to get in touch with what you feel, want, and need
- Expressing yourself honestly based on how you are feeling, what you need, and what you’d like to happen
- Taking responsibility for how you feel rather than blaming someone else for making you feel a certain way
- Using “I” language rather than “you” language. Instead of saying, “You made me feel shitty when you decided to go on a date with her when I was sick,” you say: “I felt hurt when you went on that date because I really wanted you to stay home and take care of me.”

NVC is useful for people in open relationships for several reasons. It stresses a noncombative style of relating—one that is contrary to the way most people argue—to get people to practice empathy and kindness when they communicate with each other. The more relationships you have, the more processing of everyone’s feelings you’ll do; learning how to communicate without escalating into blame, judgment, and argument is essential. NVC pushes you to get to the heart of what you feel, and why, and to share it with the other person. It teaches you to own your emotions instead of making the other person at fault for them.

Honesty

Like consent, honesty is a key quality that distinguishes nonmonogamy from cheating. Unfortunately, dishonesty surrounds us. Government officials, business leaders, celebrities—many of them considered role models—are caught twisting the truth, misleading, covering up, stealing, and lying every day. So it is regrettable but perhaps understandable that the most prevalent and visible form of nonmonogamy in our society is both nonconsensual and dishonest. Cheating on one's spouse has become an integral part of our culture, and while it may not be openly supported, it is practiced by a staggering number of people.

Society teaches us that if we find ourselves attracted to or in love with someone other than our partner, or if we have sex or a relationship with them, we must keep it a secret. In fact, many people have a nearly unconscious compulsion to withhold even their nonmonogamous thoughts and desires from their partners, let alone disclose those actions. We need to let go of the notion that venturing beyond monogamy is wrong or shameful, or that it calls for us to behave dishonestly.

Honesty is crucial to creating and sustaining a positive and fulfilling open relationship. Without it, the relationship might survive for a while, but it will never thrive or be truly meaningful. When we tell the truth about who we are, what we need and want, and how we feel, it helps us feel connected to people and form deep bonds with them. Telling the truth is not always easy, especially when you feel that the disclosure will hurt someone you love. But withholding information to protect someone is not only unfair to them, it is counterproductive to the relationship.

I really just say what is not being said. It is what you are not saying that is getting in the way of everything. —Dillon

Honesty is not just about engaging in ethical behavior and doing the right thing. It is a valuable tool for reassuring your partner and

strengthening an open relationship. Many of the people I spoke to said that when their partners share information with them, they feel informed and in the loop. Knowing what's going on makes them feel more secure about their relationship and more connected to their partner. Many say that they feel the most insecure, jealous, and anxious when they don't know what is up. What often happens is that they use their imagination to fill in the blanks, fear and irrationality come into play, and they make something into what it is not or imagine the worst-case scenario.

Radical Honesty

Several people that I interviewed practice Radical Honesty or some of its tenets in their open relationships; it is also written about and taught within polyamory communities. Like Nonviolent Communication, Radical Honesty has spawned dozens of books, lectures, and workshops. The concept was developed by the psychologist Brad Blanton and first outlined in his book *Radical Honesty: How to Transform Your Life by Telling the Truth*. The premise is that most people develop roles that they present to the world which aren't truly who they are. As part of this role creation, people are not honest with their loved ones about who they are, things they've done, and what they think, feel, and want. This lack of honesty leads to unfulfilling, unsatisfying relationships, because the connections between people are based on phony behavior.

Blanton argues that to achieve true intimacy we must share everything, expose every lie and fiction, leave nothing unsaid, and not sugar-coat any of it. In one of his "levels" of truth telling, Blanton recommends that people "begin the practice of admitting how you feel when you feel it, speaking your secret judgments of others out loud, and constantly revealing your own petty and condescending ways."⁴⁴ Think of it as the opposite of biting your tongue, keeping it to yourself, or "not saying anything if you don't have anything nice to say." To

practice Radical Honesty, you must speak everything regardless of how the person you're speaking to may react.

Some people who practice nonmonogamy believe strongly that Radical Honesty is a necessary component for a successful relationship. I appreciate some of Blanton's concepts. I believe we do create facades to please and impress others. I believe we must become more honest with ourselves and others to live authentically. However, I don't subscribe to Radical Honesty as a whole, and Blanton himself admits you have to do it completely or it doesn't work. I believe it is an egotistical and confrontational style of communication. It isn't fair or useful to share everything with someone who doesn't want to hear it, is not ready to hear it, or doesn't have the skills to process the information.

Tantra teachers Mark Michaels and Patricia Johnson, who coach couples about their relationships, have seen how Radical Honesty can be hurtful rather than helpful. Johnson says:

It's often just brutal, and it encourages a nonrelational way of communicating that's totally self-involved. We've seen people use it as a club for beating up their partners. They'll say, "I'm just being honest," or "I'm just allowing you to know what my needs are or my hurts are." They're often completely oblivious about how that message is being received and have no willingness to take any responsibility for the damage they've done, because being "honest" gives them an excuse.³

When I asked them to name the most fundamental element of creating and sustaining a positive open relationship, Michaels said, "Honesty and the ability to communicate kindly." Nearly everyone lists honesty and communication as essentials; I asked him to elaborate on his conception of kind communication. He said this:

Kindness is very hard. I'm certainly not always kind, but it's an ongoing process and an effort; I think that what it shows

is that the relationship matters and that your partner will try not to hurt you. Part of being in a relationship involves taking care of the other person. There can be excessive caretaking, and that can be very damaging, but I think that, in large part, the really unfortunate by-product of the human potential movement is that it's all about getting mine. It's not about us; it's all about me. I've seen enough of that to know how destructive it can be. If you're in a relationship with someone, you're in a sort of orbit. There has to be a kind of gravitational pull toward each other. If all of your focus is on yourselves, you're just going to fly off in different directions, and there's not going to be a relationship. I think a commitment to kindness can be the gravity that keeps you in orbit.⁶

Folks who practice Radical Honesty may see kindness as sugar-coating, but I believe it's a necessary component of compassionate communication.

Boundaries

Personal boundaries are what we use to define ourselves as separate from others, express our needs and wants, and set limits within relationships. When you have healthy boundaries, you recognize that you are an individual with your own wants, needs, and values. You don't take on other people's issues as your own or allow others to dictate your behavior based on what they want. You don't sacrifice your own desires and needs to please another person. You don't attempt to control someone else or allow yourself to be controlled. Boundaries are an important element in healthy relationships of all kinds, and open relationships are no exception.

Boundaries can be physical, sexual, or emotional/psychological. For example:

- Physical boundary: Don't touch me without my permission.
- Sexual boundary: Don't pinch my nipples during sex.
- Emotional boundary: Don't project your feelings onto me.

First you must determine what your boundaries are, and then you must be able to articulate them to your partner(s). Finally, you must be aware when someone does not respect your boundaries, and speak up for yourself. If you set a boundary and someone violates it, don't let it slide; that only sends the message *If you don't respect my boundaries, that's cool. I won't say anything. It's okay to disrespect my boundaries.*

For some people, emotional/psychological boundaries are the most complex and difficult to defend. Here's a hypothetical example. You go out with your friends and come home to your partner giddy and excited from a fun night. Your partner is angry. "I can't believe you went out and left me home alone! You're such a bitch! Then you come home and rub it in my face to make me feel worse!" *Without good personal boundaries, you would apologize for going out and having a good time and for being bubbly when you walked through the door. You acknowledge that you're a bad girlfriend.*

With good personal boundaries, you would recognize that your partner is feeling bad. You check yourself: Do I have the right to go out with my friends? Yes. Did I rub it in his face? No. You refuse to take on his feelings or to feel guilty about your night out. You recognize that something is pushing your partner's buttons, and that he's trying to make you feel bad instead of owning what's really going on. You tell him, "I can see that you're angry about me going out with friends tonight instead of being with you. I respect your feelings, but I did not do anything wrong. I was sharing my excitement with you, not deliberately trying to make you feel bad."

Learning to define good personal boundaries and respecting the boundaries of others are skills that may not have been modeled for you, or your partner, as you grew up. You may have to develop these skills.

Ultimately, boundaries are about clarity: being clear about who you are and what you need. If the line between you and your partner starts to blur, it's time to work on your boundaries.

Trust

Trust is a significant component in opening up a relationship to additional sexual and emotional partners. When a partner agrees to something you ask for and honors that agreement, it helps build your trust in them. Trust takes time to establish, but it leads to security. Many people in long-term relationships say that trust makes it easier to support and encourage their partners to explore with other people. Trust becomes an antidote to jealousy, competitiveness, possessiveness, insecurity, and fear. The message is clear: when people trust their partners and trust in the strength of their relationships, they experience less anxiety in the presence of someone new. On the flip side, a lack of trust can lead to insecurity, doubt, and unhappiness.

Some people have difficulty trusting others because of unresolved issues from childhood or past relationships. No matter how trustworthy your behavior, someone who has a hard time trusting will still find it hard to trust you. If you know that trust is difficult for you, working on it can help you resolve some of the underlying issues and avert problems in your open relationships. Often a partner's paranoia, possessiveness, or jealousy can stem from a lack of trust. If your partner has trust issues, be patient, reassuring, and supportive; do not take on

What the new model of open-ended marriage seeks to promote is risk-taking in trust; the warmth of loving without anxiety; the extension of affection; the excitement and pleasure of knowing sensuously a variety of other persons; the enrichment which personalities can contribute to each other; the joy of being fully alive in every encounter.

—RONALD MAZUR⁷

his insecurity by agreeing to unrealistic expectations or sharing his paranoia; encourage him to get help working on the issue.

Polyamory educator Anita Wagner believes that pacing yourself in a relationship can positively affect the trust level:

Trust is based on knowing a person not just in what they say about themselves, but observing them as well. It takes a while to get to know someone really well. The newer your relationship, the less substantial the foundation for it, in terms of really knowing and trusting each other. Now, there's a case to be made for the opposite: you can learn to trust that person, see them go out [with someone else], come back, continue to do right by your relationship, continue to be invested in it. So trust can be built that way too, but there has to be a good balance. Pacing yourself early in relationships helps to keep things stable and helps prevent the big blowups, the big crash-and-burns.⁸

Wagner makes an important point: don't rush the process of building trust. The more deeply you trust someone, the easier it will be to take the leap of faith with her as you explore possibilities beyond monogamy.

Fidelity and Commitment

One of the values most strongly associated with monogamy and traditional marriage is fidelity. Every day, in their wedding vows, spouses promise to be faithful to each other and to forsake all others. Most folks assume that if you're in a nonmonogamous relationship, you're being unfaithful by definition. Nonmonogamous people have tossed out the "forsaking all others" part, but that doesn't mean they reject the notion of fidelity.

Although monogamy and fidelity have become intertwined in cultural definitions, fidelity ultimately means believing strongly in

your love and in your relationship, and *keeping your promises*. If the statistics on cheating are accurate, keeping your promises is something monogamous people have a tough time doing. Nonmonogamous relationships are built not on vows of exclusivity but on the agreements people make and honor; therefore, fidelity is an essential part of non-monogamy.

There is a false assumption that open relationships are less committed than monogamous ones. This is because nonmonogamous people often make commitments in the absence of the legal documents, state recognition, and financial rewards and benefits that come with a marital commitment. They often do not have the acknowledgment, support, or acceptance of friends and families. In the absence of such external validation, they are bound together by their faith in each other and by their daily words and deeds.

Of course, self-awareness, communication, healthy boundaries, trust, fidelity, and commitment aren't the only values that make open relationships work. People in open relationships also embrace respect, generosity, freedom, and authenticity. One last quality that cannot go unmentioned in any discussion of open relationships is *compersion*, a concept that may be new to many readers. Compersion is taking joy in your partner's pleasure or happiness with another partner. For some, compersion has an erotic component: they get turned on watching, imagining, or hearing about their partner's sexual experiences. Some practitioners of polyamory think of compersion as the opposite of jealousy, or at least the antidote to jealousy. Given the problems (and drama) ignited by jealousy, you can see how compersion can go a long way toward creating a foundation for pleasure and generosity in any relationship. Read more about compersion in Chapter 13.