



Term of Endearments

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Today's word is polyamory.

Don't go to the dictionary, because even with three full pages of "poly" words, from polygraph to polyunsaturated, polyamory isn't there.

But if the group that met for a conference this past weekend in the woods of Harford County has anything to say about it - and they certainly seem to - it might someday be:

Polyamory - (noun) the practice of having more than one loving, intimate relationship at the same time, with the full knowledge and consent of all partners involved.

Don't misunderstand. The polyamorous don't insist everyone practice what they're preaching - any more than they want anyone, preachers included, foisting monogamy on them.

"So we're not always defined in the press by the Christian right ... it's time to do a little defining ourselves for a change," Robyn Trask, managing editor of *Loving More* magazine, sponsor of the conference, told participants at a welcoming session Friday night.

The polyamorous came from as far away as Puerto Rico for the three-day conference at Ramblewood, a rustic resort in the backwoods of Harford County that, according to its Web site, has been offering an environment for "unencumbered self-expression" to alternative groups for more than a decade.

Loving More, a 20-year-old quarterly journal on polyamory based in Boulder, Colo., sponsors two national conferences a year, one on the East Coast, one on the West. This was the third to be held at Ramblewood.

"I'm a polyamorous psychotherapist," said Nan Wise, attending the conference from West Orange, N.J. "I've been in a relationship with my husband for 30 years, but this is not him," she said of the man who stood with his arms wrapped around her.

"My husband and I were monogamous ... but then we found we could be very happy having our primary relationship and sharing our lives with other people as well," Wise said. "Nobody has the right to tell you how your relationships are supposed to look."

Trask opened the conference by reminding attendees it was "clothing optional" and going over the ground rules: Respect personal boundaries. Public sex is not OK. No alcohol. Smoke only in designated areas. Cabin 12, she said, was "the safe zone" - a place to go if the cabin you were sharing with other conference participants became too ... busy.

Then she announced the locations for the various workshops: "Sexual Honesty will be held in the media room ... Body Acceptance will be in the gym ... Better Sounds of Sex will be held in the barn. ... "

Trask introduced the weekend's speakers, including, at that time, the only naked participant, "Freeheart," a Virginia counselor who was there to lead the body acceptance seminar.

Trask then turned on some music and asked the group of about 80 to join hands in a circle and "share who we are." As she called out terms, those who identified themselves with those terms were invited to step inside the circle and dance.

First went the "polyfidelitous," those who have multiple romantic relationships but restrict sexual contact to specific partners.

Then went the "swingers," those who are more focused on "recreational" sex, often without emotional bonds or lasting relationships.

Heterosexuals and bisexuals followed, then members of "triads" and "quads," intimate, usually polyfidelitous networks of three and four partners.

Then came the call for the mono-poly, who, though it sounded like either a board game or a contradiction in terms, turned out to be couples in which one member is monogamous and one is polyamorous.

Definitions

The polyamorous, it seems, are as open to new terms as they are to new relationships; just as they don't want to be constrained by traditional morals and lifestyles, they don't toe the established line when it comes to the dictionary, either.

"Compersion," for instance, is part of their lingo - the feeling of taking joy in the joy a partner experiences with someone else. It, like polyfidelity, is a term that originated within the Kerista commune in San Francisco, which practiced group marriage before it disbanded in the early 1990s.

"NRE" stands for New Relationship Energy, which, as it was pointed out in a late-night gab session Friday, can often be mistaken for love among those less adept at recognizing it.

Despite all the new words - including polyamory itself, which came into more widespread use around 1990 - the concept is hardly new.

It predates the 1997 book *Ethical Sluts*; predates "friends with benefits"; predates the hippie movement and communes and the references to, and promulgation of, open relationships in early 1960s literature, including Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* and Robert Rimmer's *The Harrad Experiment*.

Heinlein, in addition to writing fictionally about open relationships, lived that way - as did a few other literary notables. William Moulton Marston, who invented an early form of the polygraph, was polyamorous. A psychologist, feminist and creator of the Wonder Woman comic book character, Marston died in 1947.

And well before then, polyamory and most of its variations were practiced - openly in some cultures, discreetly in America.

"I had relatives doing it when I was a kid 70 years ago, though they wouldn't dare admit it at that point," said a 77-year-old man attending the conference from Salem, Mass., who while married "46 or 47 years" has been living communally, and intimately, with six other people for close to 20 years.

Rick Salters, a programmer for a university in Connecticut who used to keep two pictures on his desk at work - one of his wife, one of his secondary partner - said he was polyamorous long before he heard the term, though he now uses it to describe his lifestyle.

"Growing up I really had the belief that I would only have eyes for my wife once I got married," said Salters, 57. But two years into his marriage, while sitting together answering questions in a *Playboy* magazine reader poll, he and his wife admitted they were attracted to other people.

Today, his wife of 37 years has three other lovers, and he has one.

"I grew up thinking I was monogamous because that was the only model that was available," he said.

Breaking out

That, says Trask, is what we are taught - by parents, religion, movies, the media. It's why she grew up thinking that her inability to be happy and to commit to one man meant there was something wrong with her.

Not until she was in her mid-20s and after seven broken engagements, in therapy, did she realize that she wasn't alone - and that the average American girl, programmed by society to believe her one perfect soul mate is out there, can indeed find Mr. Right. And Mr. Also Right. And Mr. He's Right, Too.

"It finally dawned on me - maybe I'm just not monogamous," said Trask, 41. "We're programmed that way from birth, but I want people to know there is a choice."

"If someone is monogamous, that's great," she added. "But I don't think humans by nature are monogamous. The true definition is having one sexual partner all your life, and very few people do that. Studies show 60 percent of men and 50 percent of women have had an affair in their marriages.

"We tend to judge relationships on how long they last. But people who have been together 25 years, in separate bedrooms, watching separate TVs because they don't want to talk to each other, should we consider that a successful marriage?"

Trask supports polygamy (multiple spouses) - both in the form of polygyny (multiple wives) and polyandry (multiple husbands). And while gay marriage is grabbing most of the headlines these days, she thinks, as opponents of gay marriage warn, multiple marriages may not be far behind.

Recently Trask was interviewed by the Christian Broadcasting Network for a report on its show *The 700 Club* about the ramifications of gay marriage.

While the report was objective, host and network founder Pat Robertson delivered some commentary afterward, said Anita Wagner, outreach director for The Institute for 21st Century Relationships and a presenter at the weekend conference. "He said we were just a bunch of people who want to get together for orgies."

Wagner and Trask acknowledged that swingers and the polyamorous share some common ground.

"The difference is, in the swing community, commonly, emotions are discouraged and forbidden. You can have sex all you want, but don't fall in love, don't get attached. It's recreational. People in the poly community most often are looking for long-term, loving relationships."

"We don't want to be portrayed as being all about sex, because that's not what we are," said Wagner. "In fact, we get accused by swingers of being a group that just sits around and talks about it."

It's not that easy

Indeed, the polyamorous are not all swingers any more than they are all wilted flower children or sex addicts. They came to the conference from all walks of life, and they practice polyamory in various forms. They do have one thing in common: Monogamy doesn't work for them.

Which doesn't mean polyamory is easy, they're quick to say.

As Salters pointed out, in an "intimate network" of four partners, there are 16 different relationships going on.

"It's not something you can do without really good relationship skills," said Wagner. But as with a traditional two-partner relationship, she added, honesty is the key.

Ken Haslam, a retired anesthesiologist from Galena, who is unmarried but has a partner of 12 years "and three or four others," summed it up this way:

"Polyamory is just like monogamy, but with more people."