

Referencia bibliográfica:

Easton, D. y Hardy, J. W. (2015). *The Ethical Slut. A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships & Other Adventures*. Berkeley (CA): Celestial Arts
Cap. II: Myths and Realities

ISBN: 978-1-890159-01-8

CHAPTER TWO

Myths and Realities

THOSE WHO SET OFF down the path of exploring new kinds of relationships and new lifestyles often find themselves blocked by beliefs—about the way society should be, the way relationships should be, the way people should be—that are both deeply rooted and unexamined.

We have all been taught that one way of relating—lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage—is the only right way. We are told that monogamy is “normal” and “natural”; if our desires do not fit into that constraint, we are morally deficient, psychologically disturbed, and going against nature.

Many of us feel instinctively that something is wrong with this picture. But how can you dig up and examine a belief that you don’t even know you hold? The ideal of lifelong monogamy as the only proper goal for relationships is so deeply buried in our culture that it’s almost invisible: we operate on these beliefs without even knowing we believe them. They’re under our feet all the time, the foundation for our assumptions, our values, our desires, our myths, our expectations. We don’t notice them until we trip over them.

Where did these beliefs get started? Often, they evolved to meet conditions that no longer exist.

Our beliefs about traditional marriage date from agrarian cultures, where you made everything you ate or wore or used, where large extended families helped get this huge amount of work done so nobody starved, and where marriage was a working proposition. When we talk about “traditional family values,” this is the family we are talking about: an extended family of grandparents and aunts and cousins, an organization to accomplish the work of staying alive. We see large families functioning in traditional ways in America today, often in cultures recently transplanted from other countries, or as a basic support system among economically vulnerable urban or rural populations.

Curiously, controlling sexual behavior didn’t seem to be that important outside the propertied classes until the Industrial Revolution, which launched a whole new era of sex-negativity, perhaps because of the rising middle class and the limited space for children in urban cultures. Doctors and ministers in the late eighteenth century began to claim that masturbation was unhealthy and sinful, that this most innocent of sexual outlets was dangerous to society—nineteenth-century childrearing manuals show devices to prevent babies from touching their genitals in their sleep. So any desire for sex, even with yourself, became a shameful secret.

But human nature will win out. We are horny creatures, and the more sexually repressive a culture becomes, the more outrageous its covert sexual thoughts and behaviors will become, as any fan of Victorian porn can attest.

In his lectures to young communists in Germany during the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, psychologist Wilhelm Reich theorized that the suppression of sexuality was essential to an authoritarian government. Without the imposition of antisexual morality, he believed, people would be free from shame and would trust their own sense of right and wrong. They would be unlikely to march to war against their wishes, or to operate death camps. Perhaps if we were raised without shame and guilt about our desires, we might be freer people in more ways than simply the sexual.

The nuclear family, which consists of parents and children relatively isolated from the extended family, is a relic of the twentieth-century middle class. Children no longer work on the farm or in the family

business; they are raised almost like pets. Modern marriage is no longer essential for survival. Now we marry in pursuit of comfort, security, sex, intimacy, and emotional connection. The increase in divorce, so deplored by today's religious right, may simply reflect the economic reality that today most of us can afford to leave relationships in which we are not happy; nobody will starve.

And still modern puritans, perhaps not yet ready to deal with the frightening prospect of truly free sexual and romantic choice, attempt to enforce the nuclear family and monogamous marriage by teaching sexual shame.

We believe that the current set of "oughta-be's," and any other set, are cultural artifacts. We believe that Nature is wondrously diverse, offering us infinite possibilities. We would like to live in a culture that respects the choices made by sluts as highly as we respect the couple celebrating their fiftieth anniversary. (And, come to think of it, what makes us assume that such a couple is monogamous anyway?)

We are paving new roads across new territory. We have no culturally approved scripts for open sexual lifestyles; we need to write our own. To write your own script requires a lot of effort, and a lot of honesty, and is the kind of hard work that brings many rewards. You may find the right way for you, and three years from now decide you want to live a different way—and that's fine. You write the script, you get to make the choices, and you get to change your mind, too.

EXERCISE *Sluts We Know and Love*

Make a list of all the people you can think of who are not monogamous, including characters from TV, movies, books, and so on. How do you feel about each of them? What can you learn (positive or negative) from him or her?

Judgments about Sluts

As you try to figure out your own path, you may encounter a lot of harsh judgments about the ways different people live. We're sure you don't need us to tell you that the world does not, for the most part, honor sluthood, or think well of those of us who are sexually explorative.

You will probably find some of these judgments in your own brain, burrowed in deeper than you ever realized. We believe that they say a lot more about the culture that promotes them than they do about any actual person, including you.

"PROMISCUOUS"

This means we enjoy too many sexual partners. We've also been called "indiscriminate" in our sexuality, which we resent: we can always tell our lovers apart.

We do not believe that there is such a thing as too much sex, except perhaps on certain happy occasions when our options exceed our abilities. Nor do we believe that the ethics we are talking about here have anything to do with moderation or abstinence. Kinsey once defined a "nymphomaniac" as "someone who has more sex than you" and, scientist that he was, demonstrated his point with statistics.

Is having less sex somehow more virtuous than having more? We think not. We measure the ethics of good sluts not by the number of their partners, but by the respect and care with which they treat them.

"AMORAL"

Our culture also tells us that sluts are evil, uncaring, amoral, and destructive: Jezebel, Casanova, Don Juan. The mythological evil slut is grasping and manipulative, seeking to steal something—virtue, money, self-esteem—from his partners. In some ways, this archetype is based on the idea that sex is a commodity, a coin you trade for something else—stability, children, a wedding ring—and that any other transaction constitutes being cheated and betrayed.

We have rarely observed any Jezebels or Casanovas in our community, but perhaps it is not very satisfying for a thief to steal what is freely given. We do not worry about being robbed of our sexual value by the people we share pleasure with.

"SINFUL"

Some people base their sense of ethics on what they've been told that God, or their church, or their parents, or their culture, believes to be okay or not okay. They believe that being good consists of obedience to laws set down by a power greater than themselves.

Religion, we think, has a great deal to offer to many people—the comfort of faith and the security of community among them. But believing that God doesn't like sex, as many religions seem to, is like believing that God doesn't like you. Because of this belief, a tremendous number of people carry great shame for their own perfectly natural sexual desires and activities.

We prefer the beliefs of a woman we met, a devoted churchgoer in a fundamentalist faith. She told us that when she was about five years old, she discovered the joys of masturbation in the back seat of the family car, tucked under a warm blanket on a long trip. It felt so wonderful that she concluded that the existence of her clitoris was proof positive that God loved her.

"PATHOLOGICAL"

When psychological studies of human behavior came into vogue in the late nineteenth century, Krafft-Ebing and Freud attempted to create more tolerance by theorizing that sluts are not bad but sick, suffering from psychopathology that is not their fault, since their neurosis derives from having their sexuality warped by their parents during their toilet training. So, they said, we should no longer burn sluts at the stake but instead send them to mental hospitals to be cured, in an environment that permits no sexual expression at all, healthy or otherwise.

During your authors' childhood and adolescence in the early 1960s, it was common practice to certify and incarcerate adolescents for "treatment" of the "illness" of being sexual, especially if they were gay or lesbian, or female and in danger of damaging their market value as virgins. This sort of thing still takes place more often than you might think. More recently we hear about sex addicts, avoidance of intimacy, commitment-phobia, and attachment disorders. These terms were created to describe genuine problems, but they are far too often used as weapons in a moral war against all sexual freedom.

The whole idea of sex addiction is a controversial one: many people feel that the word "addiction" is not well suited to discussing behavioral issues like sex. However, everybody seems to agree that substituting sex for fulfillment of other needs—to allay anxiety, for instance, or bolster sagging self-esteem—represents a problem.

Only you can decide whether your sexual behaviors have become compulsive and whether you wish to change them. Some people try to validate their sexual attractiveness over and over, using sex as constant reassurance because they do not see themselves as inherently attractive or lovable. Sex can be used as a substitute for connection. Sex can be the only coin valuable enough to attract attention and approval.

Some twelve-step groups and therapists who subscribe to the addiction model may try to tell you that anything but the most conservative of sexual behaviors is wrong, or unhealthy, or “into your addiction”; we encourage you to trust your own beliefs and find yourself a supportive environment. Sexual Compulsives Anonymous and Sex Addicts Anonymous encourage you to define the healthy sex life you want for yourself. If your goal is monogamy, that’s fine, and if your goal is to stop seeking sex in the place of friendship, or any other behavior pattern that you wish to resculpt, that’s fine too. We do not believe that successfully recovering sex addicts have to be monogamous unless they want to be.

“EASY”

Is there, we wonder, some virtue in being difficult?

Myths about Sluts

One of the challenges facing the ethical slut is our culture’s insistence that, simply because “everybody knows” something, it must obviously be true. We urge you to regard with great skepticism any sentence that begins “Everybody knows that . . .” or “Common sense tells us that . . .” or “It’s common knowledge that . . .” Often, these phrases are signposts for cultural belief systems that may be antisexual, monogamy-centrist, and/or codependent. Questioning “what everybody does” can be difficult and disorienting, but we have found it to be rewarding: questioning is the first step toward generating a new paradigm, your own paradigm of how you ought to be.

Cultural belief systems can be very deeply rooted in literature, law, and archetypes, which means that shaking them from your own personal ethos can be difficult. But the first step in exploring them is, of course, recognizing them. Here, then, are some of the pervasive myths

that we have heard all our lives and have come to understand are most often untrue and destructive to our relationships and our lives.

**MYTH #1: LONG-TERM MONOGAMOUS
RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE ONLY REAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Lifetime monogamy as an ideal is a relatively new concept in human history and makes us unique among primates. There is nothing that can be achieved within a long-term monogamous relationship that cannot be achieved without one. Business partnership, deep attachment, stable parenting, personal growth, care and companionship in old age are all well within the abilities of the slut.

People who believe this myth may feel that something is wrong with them if they aren't in a committed twosome—if they prefer to remain free agents, if they discover themselves loving more than one person at a time, if they have tried one or more traditional relationships that didn't work out. Instead of questioning the myth, they question themselves: Am I incomplete? Where is my other half? The myth teaches them that they are not good enough in and of themselves. Often people develop a very unrealistic view of couplehood—Mr. or Ms. Right will automatically solve all their problems, fill all the gaps, make their lives complete.

A subset of this myth is the belief that if you're really in love, you will automatically lose all interest in others; thus, if you're having sexual or romantic feelings toward anyone but your partner, you're not really in love. This belief has cost many people a great deal of happiness through the centuries yet is untrue to the point of absurdity: a ring around the finger does not cause a nerve block to the genitals.

And, we must ask, if monogamy is the only acceptable option, the only true form of love, than are these agreements genuinely consensual? We have many friends who have chosen to be monogamous, and we applaud them. But how many people in our society consciously make that choice?

MYTH #2: ROMANTIC LOVE IS THE ONLY REAL LOVE

Look at the lyrics of popular songs, or read some classical poetry: the phrases we choose to describe romantic love don't really sound all that

pleasant. Crazy in love, love hurts, obsession, heartbreak . . . these are all descriptions of mental or physical illness.

The thing that gets called romantic love in this culture seems to be a heady cocktail of lust and adrenaline, sparked by uncertainty, insecurity, perhaps even anger or danger. The chills up the spine that we recognize as passion are, in fact, the same physical phenomenon as hair rising up on a cat's back and are caused by the fight-or-flight response.

This kind of love can be thrilling and overwhelming and sometimes a hell of a lot of fun, but it is not the only "real" kind of love, nor is it always a good basis for an ongoing relationship. Yet as George Bernard Shaw famously remarked, "When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part."

MYTH #3: SEXUAL DESIRE IS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE

This one goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden and leads to a lot of crazy-making double standards. Some religions appear to believe that women's sexuality is evil and dangerous, and exists only to lure men to their doom. From the Victorian era, we get the idea that men are hopelessly voracious and predatory when it comes to sex, and women are supposed to control and civilize them by being pure, asexual, and withholding—men are the gas pedal and women the brakes, which is, we think, pretty hard on the engine. Neither of these works for us.

Many people also believe that unashamed sexual desire, particularly desire for more than one person, inevitably destroys the family—yet we suspect that far more families have been destroyed by bitter divorces over adultery than have ever been disturbed by ethical consensual nonmonogamy.

MYTH #4: LOVING SOMEONE MAKES IT OKAY TO CONTROL HIS OR HER BEHAVIOR

This kind of territorial reasoning is designed, we guess, to make people feel secure, but we don't believe that anybody has the right, much less the obligation, to control the behavior of another functioning adult.

Being treated according to this myth doesn't make us feel secure, it makes us feel furious. The old "awww, she's jealous—she must really care about me" reasoning, or the scene in which the girl falls in love with the boy when he punches out a rival suitor, are symptomatic of a very disturbed set of personal boundaries that can lead to a great deal of unhappiness.

This myth also leads to the belief, so often promulgated in Hollywood films and popular literature, that sleeping with someone else is something you do *to* your partner, not *for* yourself, and is, moreover, the very worst thing you can do to someone. For many years, in New York State, adultery was the only legally acceptable grounds for divorce, leaving those who had unfortunately married batterers or drunks in a very difficult position. And the legal punishment for "cheating" could be to lose one's job, home, money, and kids, because of the wounding to the "betrayed" partner—that is, if you got caught. So one was supposed to cheat in secrecy to protect one's partner's dignity and keep the family together.

MYTH #5: JEALOUSY IS INEVITABLE AND IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERCOME

Jealousy is, without a doubt, a very common experience, so much so that a person who doesn't experience jealousy is looked at as a bit odd, or in denial. But often a situation that would cause intense jealousy for one person can be no big deal for another. Some people get jealous when their honey takes a sip out of someone else's Coke, others happily watch their beloved wave bye-bye for a month of amorous sporting with a friend at the far end of the country.

Some people also believe that jealousy is such a shattering emotion that they have no choice but to succumb to it. People who believe this often believe that any form of nonmonogamy *should* be nonconsensual and completely secret, in order to protect the "betrayed" partner from having to feel such an impossibly difficult emotion.

On the contrary, we have found that jealousy is an emotion like any other: it feels bad (sometimes very bad), but it is not intolerable. We have also found that many of the "oughta-be's" that lead to jealousy can be unlearned and that unlearning them is often a useful process. Later in this book, we will spend a lot more time talking about jealousy

and the strategies many people have successfully employed to cope with it.

MYTH #6: OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENTS REDUCE INTIMACY IN THE PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP

Most marriage counselors, and certain popular TV psychologists, believe when a member of an otherwise happy couple has an “affair,” this must be a symptom of unresolved conflict or unfulfilled needs that should be dealt with in the primary relationship. Of course, this is occasionally true, but not nearly as often as many “relationship gurus” would like us to believe. Moreover, this myth leaves no room for the possibility of growthful and constructive open sexual lifestyles.

It is cruel and insensitive to interpret an affair as a symptom of sickness in the relationship, as it leaves “cheated-on” partners—who may already be feeling insecure—to wonder what is wrong with them. Meanwhile, “cheating” partners get told that they are only trying to get back at their primary partners and don’t really want, need, or even like their lovers.

Many people have sex outside their primary relationships for reasons that have nothing to do with any inadequacy in their partner or in the relationship. The new relationship may simply be a natural extension of an emotional and/or physical attraction to someone besides the primary partner. Or perhaps this outside relationship allows a particular kind of intimacy that the primary partner doesn’t even want (such as kinky sex or going to football games) and thus constitutes a solution for an otherwise insoluble conflict. Or perhaps it meets other needs—like a need for uncomplicated physical sex without the trappings of relationship, or for sex with someone of a gender other than one’s partner’s, or for sex at a time when it is otherwise not available (during travel or a partner’s illness, for example).

An outside involvement does not have to subtract in any way from the intimacy you share with your partner unless you let it. And we sincerely hope you won’t.

MYTH #7: LOVE CONQUERS ALL

Hollywood tells us that “love means never having to say you’re sorry,” and we, fools that we are, believe it. This myth has it that if you’re

really in love with someone, you never have to argue, disagree, communicate, negotiate, or do any other kind of work. It also tells us that love means we automatically get turned on by our beloved and that we never have to lift a finger or make any effort to deliberately kindle passion. Those who believe this myth may find themselves feeling that their love has failed every time they need to schedule a discussion or to have a courteous (or not-so-courteous) disagreement. They may also believe that any sexual behavior that doesn't fit their criteria for "normal" sex—from fantasies to vibrators—is "artificial" and indicates that something is lacking in the quality of their love.

EXERCISE Why Sluthood? Why Not?

Write a list of every reason you can think of that any person anywhere might want to be a slut. You can do this on your own, or with a friend or a lover. Which of these tell you what kind of slut you don't want to be? Which of these are your very good and valid reasons?

Steps to a Freer Paradigm

So in this slightly disorienting world of sluthood, in which everything your mom, your minister, your spouse, and your television ever told you is probably wrong, how do you find new beliefs that support your new lifestyle? Letting go of old paradigms can leave you in a scary emptiness, your stomach churning as if you were in free fall. You don't need the old myths, but what will you have instead? We encourage you to seek your own truths on your way to slutty bliss, but just in case you could use a hint or two, here are some of the ones that have worked well for us.