

OK, BEFORE WE START...

My goal through **Entertaining A Ghost** is to provide a forum for people with views outside the mainstream to talk about relationships and allow for other discourses. What I'm trying to say is that we're trying to explore the different ways relationships are thought about and talked about in our society, hopefully to broaden some horizons and maybe even set the wheels in motion so we can affect some real change in the way we see each other.

In this first issue I wanted to talk about language and terms (post-modern, huh?), like how language can affect the ways people think about, organize, and structure relationships. I thought starting here made sense because it seems as if a lot of people don't really think about the terminology they use and are ultimately hemmed in by the conventions inherent in language. And where better to begin a revolution than with words?

-Anne

So I want this to be a submission-based zine, if you have any ideas for something you'd like to contribute, you can contact me at the addresses below.

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David Jay

Cross Poly-Ation

Why the polyamorous and asexual communities could make beautiful music together

It's not all about the sex.

These notable words close almost every episode of the hit podcast Polyamory Weekly, which goes out to about 2,000 poly and poly-friendly devotees. Minx, the shows sexy (and asexy) host, is quick to point out that poly relationships are too complicated to keep track of by simply paying attention to who's boinking who. As fun and important as sex is it's rarely the only important thing going on in a relationship and never the only important thing going on in someone's life. To form healthy poly relationships and have hot poly sex, people need to become comfortable understanding and talking about nonsexual intimacy.

The first time I heard Minx's signature catchphrase I let out a loud, embarrassingly public chuckle of excitement. To me the idea that intimate relationships are all about the sex has been the center of a lifelong struggle, and hearing anyone from outside of my immediate community point out that it wasn't was a rare and significant event.

Like a lot of people out there, I flat-out no-joke don't give a fuck about sex. This can be a pretty scary thing to realize in a world where monogamy dictates that the person you are closest to is also the person you sleep with. Like almost all asexual people I came to terms with my identity in total isolation, independently inventing the word "asexual" to describe myself and frantically trying to figure out exactly what that meant. After about four years of soul searching, around the time I graduated high school, I'd come to the realization that being asexual was

pretty much like being gay, bi or straight; not really something I chose, not really something I could change and not really something that was a problem.

After so much emotional turmoil I was eager to meet other people like me, and I started a website called the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which you're welcome to check out at www.asexauality.org. As it turns out, thousands and thousands of people out there were going through more or less the same thing, inventing the same word out of thin air to describe themselves and typing it into Google.

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The community on AVEN now has almost 11,000 registered members hailing from all over the world, and we're starting discussions about asexuality everywhere from academic circles to the mainstream press. And from the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists to the Montel Williams Show the idea that it is all about the sex remains our biggest barrier to acceptance. See, when it comes to asexuality it's all about relationships. In the asexual community we spend an inordinate amount of time thinking and talking about our relationships. In a society where the word "relationship" is often taken to mean "a relationship involving sex" understanding and actively pursuing nonsexual intimate relationships can be a daunting challenge.

Sex isn't the problem. When you get right down to it sex is just a fun, sometimes affectionate, occasionally baby-producing thing that people do. There's no really compelling reason why it

relationship, this person isn't necessarily #1 in their life. So, even though they separate the two types of relationships, one doesn't necessarily take precedence over the other- and, there generally isn't just one person they'd say is the most important person in their life. Instead, it would be like our mountain range.

As for hardwiring... that's a good question. My personal feelings are that it's not hardwired into people, but I don't know. I'm more of a one-on-one person- I like hanging out in groups, but I'm often more comfortable hanging out with one person at a time. I don't think this necessarily points to some sort of inborn desire to put one person in a top position, it's just a personal preference in how I want to spend time with people I care about. I don't know how much this relates to what you were saying...

I'm starting to hear a bit about polyamory around here- not that much, but some. I think some people are relaxing some of their more strict rules about relationships and how you can connect with people (and how many people you can connect with). Which is good, and I hope that it continues as polyamory and asexuality become more visible!

Good point; almost everyone has multiple relationships, huh? And obviously lots of people have very good friends, or family members that are really really close that they confide in more than their significant others or whatnot. But... we keep eliminating the possibilities between what makes a friend and what makes a significant other/dating type relationship—and thus, the dividing line between single and dating. Is it really, really just sexual in nature? I guess I shouldn't say "just"... but it seems like there should be something more to it then that when people go to all the effort of being "exclusive" and redefining themselves as dating instead of single... what is it?!

Well, some people say it really is just different- it's a different kind of love. Whether or not it's inherently different, or if that difference is created by the structure & expectations of the relationship, I don't know. And some people say that the amount/quality of love that one feels for a close friend vs. a romantic partner might not be different, but your feelings are more intense in a romantic relationship. So maybe that's partly why people would feel that it makes sense to sort of define themselves by whether they're dating or not. Really, there seems to be such a variety in how people view their relationships that maybe there isn't just one definite explanation. Maybe it's just a mix of a whole bunch of different reasons together.

We're so much closer to an answer now, eh? ;)

taining. Perhaps not helpful for your zine, but entertaining. ;)

It's true, oftentimes if people at least theoretically define their relationships in terms of sex, it makes it easier to figure out if you've crossed "the line" between friendship and more than friendship. Even maybe in the case of asexuals—"I don't want to have sex with anyone, but if I DID, I would feel most comfortable exploring it with you... " or something like that.

Your point about exclusivity is good, too. Unless it's explicitly stated, when you're dating one person, you're not dating other people. There's definitely a hierarchy. And I guess we all have hierarchies of some sort or another. With people who are dating/in a relationship, their relationship hierarchy has a single pinnacle or point with the other relationships becoming progressively less important as they go down. For me, I have people that I consider "friends" and people that I consider "not friends" and people that I don't know and people that are acquaintances and people that I don't like. . . etc. etc. etc. It's just that I don't have a single peak in my hierarchy—I guess for us, it would look more like a mountain range or a flat-topped pyramid, maybe. The interesting question is: do the various peaks of our mountain range reach as high as the dating person's single peak . . . or does it just work out so that the area under the curve equals the same thing? And does it even matter? . . . and always, always: why is the dating person's single peak more important than my mountain range? ;)

Remember back to elementary when people would ask you who your best friend was? There was always an assumption, even then, that there was one person in your life who had the position of most importance (although, actually, for much of that time I had two good friends). Why exactly is that? Is it something hardwired into us? —socially, or whatever? And does it happen to be defunct in some people. . . like me?

Also, in my various friendships it often happens that one will temporarily take precedence over others for a few days. . . or a few months. . . or a few years, either because I'm seeing that person around more or for whatever reason I'm utilizing whatever emotional "stuff" I get from that particular relationship for some reason. It's like even among my multiple relationships, various ones will start to spread and take up more space and place in the hierarchy for a while. Maybe it IS a hardwiring thing. Or maybe it's a concentration thing? We tend to focus on small groups or individuals because we don't have the memory capacity to deal with an infinite number of people??

Another interesting thing is that the accepted hierarchy is changing, a little. Besides the obvious couple thing, more people are figuring out the polyamory/polygamous thing. . . although I grew up in the intermountain west, so maybe polygamy is more accepted there. ;) And then there's the heterosexual life partner idea or the life-partner-as-roommate idea. Though maybe those are just gaining ground in the asexual community. BUT all of those relationships, whether sexual or not, assume a discrete number of "peaks" . . . the exception being maybe polyamory in its more multiplicative and open forms, as I understand it.

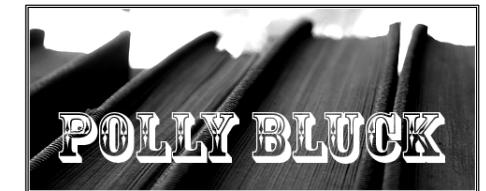
Ok, now I'm just confusing myself.

Ok, so what you said about how people dating/part of a couple having one peak, meaning one person in their life who's at the top, and then as we go down, relationships get progressively less important- I think that's probably the case for many people. But (and I think this is important), it's still not the case for every person who is monogamous/dating/in a coupled relationship/insert term here (always exceptions, aren't there?). I know among some of the people in my life that even though they might differentiate between friend & romantic partner, might be in an exclusive

should be all about the sex, but perplexingly for a lot of people it is. My personal opinion and that of a number of other AVENites is that sex is a big part of how most people classify and prioritize relationships. It's not that relationships which involve sex are necessarily more intimate or more committed or more fun than relationships which don't, it's just that we're used to treating them that way. Pretending that it's all about the sex makes relationships a lot simpler by allowing most people to isolate one significant other from a sea of friendships. Sexual monogamy isn't just about having one sexual partner, it's about taking that sexual relationship a lot more seriously than all of your other nonsexual relationships. Take out the emphasis on sex and you suddenly find yourself juggling multiple intimate relationships at the same time; sweating over schedules, having long discussions about commitment and using words like "frubble."

You might be surprised to learn that a lot of the language that asexual people use to talk about nonsexual intimacy was inspired by eavesdropping on the poly community. Even asexual people who identify as monogamous have to openly talk about the fact that they have multiple intimate relationships in their lives, and defining "cheating" in a monogamous asexual relationship requires an in-depth discussion of rules and boundaries. There are a number of asexual people who identify as poly, and many more who struggle to define the difference between a "partner" and a "friend."

All of this means that there are real benefits to polyamorous and asexual people understanding and accepting one another. Starting a dialogue between our two communities could give all of us a richer understanding of the issues we struggle with both in our relationships and in our search for public acceptance. Check out my podcast on asexual relationships at asexualunderground.blogspot.com and drop by asexuality.org to read up on asexuality and make a few friends. You'll be seeing us around.



That Confusing Stuff I Always Say

In the early 1970s we talked all the time about new ways of being together. We used words that sound like a joke now, communal houses, open relationships, the death of the nuclear family. But what we meant was what some of us still mean – that the old models don't quite fit who we want to be. To our parents we were threatening everything. To us, we were creating a dream in which nobody would be alone unless they wanted to be and everyone would feel valued enough. We wondered out loud why friends were less than lovers, why marriage and the family were the ideal, why love had to be in couples. And hey, here we are again.

I was a lesbian feminist, so we didn't countenance marriage anyway. We changed our minds all the time about monogamy or polyamory, but lived in a travelling circus of big squats, women's campaigns and blazing rows, believing that underneath it all, all of us would somehow be together. But society both changed and didn't, and though some attitudes changed, love and sexual jealousy were never really going to go away, and to some extent we drifted off into other lives, though some of the strong friendships hung around.

I've been in love, or what I considered in love (interesting that it's something you fall into rather than a place you arrive while looking where you're going, isn't it?) and while it was happening I did feel different with that one other woman, even though the other people, and space to myself, mattered as well. This felt difficult but right. One woman I fell in love with was killed, which is another story. Of course those

times were far from perfect and I kept trying to get the hang of wanting sex more (I never hated it, but thought I was doing something wrong).

Since menopause I no longer seem to get crushes I want to do anything about. There's temptation to retreat into middle-aged cynicism, and physically I've happily become fatter and plainer. Yet

"We changed our minds all the time about monogamy or polyamory, but lived in a travelling circus of big squats, women's campaigns and blazing rows, believing that underneath it all, all of us would somehow be together."

I'm still the same mass of contradiction. I still go on being moved, more often than not, by the idea that the people, mostly women, in my life are just my important people, rarely separated into categories of lover, partner, family, friend. I have also started to mix with the people calling themselves "queer", another way of saying all the definitions, of sex, gender and relationship, are up in the air again.

The word "asexual" was around as a speculative possibility among queers, but when I Googled it and started lurking on AVEN a year ago I was thinking about an old friend who had got enthusiastic about wild polyamorous sex, and idly wondering why I had never felt like that. It wasn't a sea change and I was damned if I actually wanted a new orientation to adjust to; I wanted to hang on to the contradictory ones I had already. In AVEN, I could apparently still call myself "lesbian" so long as I referred to this as a romantic orientation, though what this meant was already under heavy debate. I found the word "romantic" another bad fit and vaguely creepy, but I couldn't explain attractedness either. I knew that it wasn't about trying to place myself in a loving couple as if the complications of

my past had never happened. I can't answer any of my own questions about any of this. But I know I want the questions, the speculation, the discussion, about broadening the ways in which people might be loving without controlling each other, and what love means anyway, to remain inventive and open.



In Harmony: Levels of Desire

I know a guy who's a sexaholic. He rarely talks about anything other than sex, so when I told him I'm asexual, he said "That's impossible" and tried to come up with explanations of how I could find sexual pleasure in my life. I also have friends who told me they understood, but couldn't relate, and even friends who even seemed as if they could relate a little. I think that these varied reactions are all proof of how inherently different we all are.

The terms "sexual" and "asexual" really aren't enough to describe the infinite levels of desire a person can have. If it were so simple, then the only two types of people in the world would be me and the guy I know who told me I haven't lived until I've had an orgasm. However, I've seen posts on message boards from people who have even less desire than I do, since I would at least like to be in a relationship, and there are all kinds of romantic and sexual desires in between the two extremes. The problem here is that the world prefers to see things in black and white, without considering the many shades of grey in between. Don't believe me? Just look at our history. For every period of time, it was either socially acceptable to be promiscuous and discuss sexual exploits, or it wasn't. In medieval times, people were more openly sexual, but in the Victorian era, sex was

friends and family and everything else. But that's magnitude of what I think of when I try to rationalize this problem: I have lots of good friends and relationships and yet am "single" versus other people that are "dating". There must be some split between the definition of friend and dating, but I'm at a loss to comprehend it.

Yeah. It is definitely pervasive, isn't it? ;) And that locks us into the problem of why it's so different: why people define it that way and for what purpose—just for procreation? No. The definition of whether you consider yourself to be dating obviously fills more than an emotional need, although I'm sure it fills some of those. It's obviously not related to simple attractiveness. It's not even necessary that it be primarily sexual. Is it the "romantic" drive that's being fulfilled that leads to the definition of "dating" versus "just friends"? (Ugh, I don't like that word: "romantic." Or "just friends" either, for that matter. Trivializes the issue.)

Well, that's the problem. For many people, there seems to be some important difference between friendship & romance, which is why the relationships are defined differently. Is there really some romance drive? I don't know. I don't know if that's the best word for it, because maybe that term really just encompasses a wide variety of needs & desires & attractions that people have— and that all varies from person to person too, I'd think.

So, umm... Ok. People have said to me before that the difference between friendship and a romantic partner is that you can't have sex with a friend. How many people feel this way, I don't know. But I think it sort of highlights the point that a lot of this division is kind of sexual. Obviously sex isn't the only thing going on in romantic relationships (or of course, in all romantic relationships)— I would think most people are aware of other things going on that, to them, makes the

relationship different from their friendships. But maybe the presence or absence of a sexual component to the relationship is what makes for an easy dividing line between "friendship" and "romance"? And maybe that sexual dividing line has caused people to think of each relationship as having other differences? And I'll just add that I'm not trying to ignore non-sexual romantic relationships that people form, but maybe this way of differentiating between relationships has its roots in a sexual way of thinking. I'm not trying to say that people don't really feel that difference—I think it's there for a lot of people, and I think a lot of people put maybe more of their emotional energy into that particular relationship so there would be a difference—plus, most romantic relationships have some level of exclusivity...

Man, I'm sort of going off topic, aren't I? Maybe it's pointless to theorize why people differentiate between their relationships, I dunno. It's important to me because I don't do that, so I've needed to figure out how to think about the close relationships in my life outside of this system. I guess that's basically why I wanted to talk about the word/label "single," because it's a word that when applied to me, doesn't take into the account the connections I form with other people. Maybe it's just a need for social validation on my part, or the need to recognize that yeah, I can have just as close relationships as other people even if I'm asexual, if the relationship isn't sexual, if I'm not in an exclusive relationship, if we aren't "dating" or don't think of ourselves as a couple.

Ha ha, I hope I'm not ranting too much!

No, I think it's an important point. Although you're right, we're probably wandering off the "single" definition topic. . . .but that's OK, this is enter-

of relationships that I'm in that are important to me, but if one of them ends, I still have an identity independent of the term "single" or "dating." I don't understand how the complexities of all of the various relationships I participate in would be conducive to defining myself statically as part of a single relationship.

I know that there are lots of relationships where you are defined in terms of someone else—obviously, I'll always be introduced by my mother as "my daughter" and I'll always introduce my friends from where I met them, "my friend from high school/graduate school/college," but I don't use those labels as an introduction of myself if the other person isn't in the room. I know that in some cultures it was (or still is) common to be defined as part of your family or to have your father's last name as yours ("John, son of Jack"). Is that where this desire to be defined as "dating" comes from? To be part of something bigger than yourself, and then to define yourself by it? If so, that's fine, but I still don't see why people that don't define themselves that way only have words to use that sound less, like "single."

Yeah, I know what you mean- it really focuses on whether you're a part of a couple more than anything else- it defines a person by their "relationship status," whatever that means (another term that bugs me, heh). And I feel like all of my relationships are a bit too complex for that- so it doesn't really make sense to single out one relationship and say that if I have that relationship, I'm no longer "single" or alone or whatever. I have a web of relationships, really, and they all add/contribute different things to my life. How can I think of myself as single when I have all these people in my life? I don't feel like anything's missing... Maybe I would if I limited some things to a single relationship- you know, if I only allowed myself to get really close to just one person. And if I didn't have that relationship at a

particular time in my life, I suppose it would make more sense to think of myself as single, I dunno.

So, I think defining yourself as single vs. dating/in a relationship/part of a couple/etc. is just such a common and accepted part of our culture. It's how most people think of their relationships- that there's one separate kind of relationship, and then there's all your friends and family. I know lots of people don't think of their friends as all being the same, but there's that understanding that the Relationship is something different from other relationships. I would think that's why it makes sense to most people to define their relationship status as being in that Relationship or not.

I agree with what you're saying. But the funny thing is that obviously people in relationships have "outside" relationships too—presumably deep and meaningful ones. I mean, I'm good friends with several people who are married—I work with one of them, I probably spend more waking hours with him than he does with his wife. That doesn't mean that he defines himself around being my workmate. Obviously the various relationships fill different needs; and certainly my married friends have known their spouses longer than they've known me. But is it really on such a fundamentally different level that it deserves and entirely different vocabulary when we're defining me versus them?

Let's say that you do allow yourself to be really really close to one and only one person enough so that you DO define yourself around that particular, single relationship. How in the world do you have the energy to keep doing that when the relationship ends and you need to find someone else? It seems as though doing that: tying yourself to one person, and if that fails, having no "fall-back" friends and then starting all over to invest your "self" seems crazy. And anyway, I know from friends that are in relationships that that doesn't happen, they of course maintain networks of

frowned upon and never discussed in public. Today, we're back to the more promiscuous side of things due to sex being portrayed all over the media as well as being the primary topic of conversation among teens and young adults.

In the Victorian era, not desiring sex would be looked upon as healthy, and having sex before marriage or discussing it openly would place a person in a bad standing with society. Today, showing an interest in sex will earn a person lots of friends and fun conversations, while showing a disinterest means you should seek help. Either way, people will only see the black or the white, not the shades of grey in between. We've yet to have an era in which it is socially acceptable to want as much or as little sex as you desire.

One strong interest of mine that makes me stand out from the majority is that I still love to watch cartoons. One of my favorite animated series from the early '90s, Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, contained a song that I feel is extremely relevant to this blindness of all the in-

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between levels of interest. In the episode called "The Evil Manta," Ariel sings a song called "In Harmony" about how we should all embrace each other's differences. My favorite line from the song is "If there was only one note, how boring life would be / I'm glad there are so many notes in many different keys." If people could just embrace that we all have different levels of desire, we could all live in harmony and the world would be a better place.

People searching for relationships have a lot of trouble finding their ideal partner due to the huge diversity of people in the world. If life were so simple that

every single person desired the exact same thing, it would be far easier to find an ideal partner for a relationship. However, since people are so different, the challenge of finding just the right person who is compatible through sexual desire, interests, and emotion is a lot more exciting, and I think it makes the world much more interesting.



Examining Relationships Through an Asexual Lens

"Who is she?" (Insert favorite pronoun here.) This simple question is inextricably intertwined with relationship status. "Oh, she is Marie's daughter," or "She is Jesse's girlfriend." The relationship defines the person's position in a community. As the person grows older, the descriptors used to define such relationships transition from familial at a young age to "significant", i.e. sexual, at an older age. Anyone who deviates from this system upsets the relationship hierarchy and is therefore considered odd or "other".

The moment I perceived the system was the moment I realized I stood outside of it. As a single asexual woman who also identifies as queer, I realized I did not fit the prescribed relationship system. My journey began with the simple act of writing a research paper. At the suggestion of a friend, I chose to research the social construction of gender. This theory states that the terms "man" and "woman" erroneously define a gender binary, where each person must be one or the other—"man" or "woman". The theory further postulates that gender actually exists along a continuum, which allows for an infinite number of gender possibilities. Wow. I had long since understood that people could possess varying degrees of femininity and masculinity—regardless of biological sex—

but the concept of an infinite number of genders revolutionized my understanding of the whole topic.

As I delved deeper into gender theory, I stumbled upon queer theory. Queer theory basically states that there exists an infinite number of possible sexualities and each person can create their own label to describe their personal experience. Queer theory encourages people to tweak and defy the system in an effort to create new ways of expressing personal identity. It was as if the theorists were speaking directly to me. Not only did I never feel straight or gay, I never even understood why (American) society tried so hard to distinguish one group from the other (this should have been my first clue I was asexual). Queer theory allowed me to better perceive the imposed sexual binary and its connection to the relationship system.

Soon after delving into the languages of gender theory and queer theory, I applied my newly gained knowledge to a different kind of language—German. As a junior in college, I studied for a semester in Austria. I was lucky by most accounts in that I already spoke German, albeit with a slight accent. To my surprise, I learned that my English-language experience with queer theory translated poorly into my German-language experience in the queer community. Not only did I need to translate English into German, but I also needed to translate theory into experience across two cultures. I vividly remember the day when my peers began to question my position in, and relationship to, the straight and queer

communities. Upon joining a queer women's group, I immediately gained (at least) three labels: queer, woman, and American. The asexual label was not included. As we introduced ourselves to one another and shared some of our stories, I could feel the group's suspicion grow: I had never been "in a relationship"; I easily passed as straight; and perhaps most importantly, I spoke neither of their languages—neither German nor what I'll call the "queer colloquial"—perfectly. Their suspicion

elicited my own fears: Was asexuality not inherently queer? Did I enter a community where I was not welcome or where I did not belong?

'Not only did I never feel straight or gay, I never even understood why (American) society tried so hard to distinguish one group from the other "

I was never able to fully answer these questions because the group dispersed shortly after the first few meetings.

However, that day remains emblazoned in my mind and I return to it often when thinking about relationships.

Relationships exist in and of themselves, but the language used to describe the relationship depends on who is doing the describing. What makes a relationship significant? Some of my relationships are just as reciprocally fulfilling as any "significant other" (read: sexual) relationships others may have. The challenge is to describe them to people outside of the asexual community as such. When we can communicate this concept successfully, however, we have the potential to trigger an insight as earth-shattering as was the insight I gained the day I discovered queer theory. We can expose a system previously perceived as rigid and static as one actually consisting of infinite personal and relationship-based identities. Any relationship of which the mind can conceive, we as humans can create.

So, go. Explore. An infinite number of possibilities awaits you.

Omnis et Nihil

" We are equal and opposite reactions. He's my best friend, my visionary. And my fears. Although our kinship is profound I don't want his heart or body. It's not like that; we don't have those

or else part and parcel of the strongest bond. It is because of this that the deepest love entails sex, therefore by labeling ourselves straight, gay, asexual, or anything in between, we set limits on how deeply we can care about someone, and how much we should feel for that person.

Most heterosexual people will not consider themselves able to form as deep a bond with someone of the same sex, or someone of a different orientation. They would feel that being in love with such a person isn't an option. The same can be said for asexuals looking for an asexual partner: they simply don't feel equal to the task of loving a sexual person.

... I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound right to me. It only holds true while sexual intimacy is seen as a necessary component of love. But this doesn't have to be the case.

Of course, none of these observations I've made are universally true. They are commonly held assumptions, though. Which is why, the way I see it, labeling ourselves is a way of delimiting our affection, in the sociological (not biological) sense.

Mind you, I'm asexual. I don't experience sexual attraction, so for me, the disassociation of love and sex comes quite naturally. But really, at the end of the day, the labels we attach to ourselves can never fully describe who we are, or how we relate to one another. We're far too complex for that.



SINGLE - A Collaborative Article

So yeah! Single. This is something that I've thought about to some extent, & I know I've talked about it on AVEN. Basically, to me, it implies a sense of isolation and aloneness because you're not in a specific kind of relationship. The thing is, I don't really follow more common relationship forms/models—meaning I don't date, I'm not in an exclusive relationship... I don't say that I have a boyfriend(s) or girlfriend(s). Which to many people would mean that I'm single, right? But I have a hard time saying that, because I don't feel single, because I have some intimate & important relationships in my life—regardless of the fact that we call each other friends, I have a hard time thinking of myself as being "single."

I agree. I guess the problem that I have with the term is that it makes me feel as though your identity requires defining yourself in relation to another person—as though you are broken if you are not defined as part of a duplet or multiplet. I don't really think of myself in those terms, so it doesn't feel like the word single should apply either. That makes it feel even weirder if people ask "are you dating?" —because I don't really define myself in that sphere to start with, it doesn't matter. Also, the relationships I'm in are fluid. They change constantly (usually for the better), but despite changes, my definition of myself does not change. There are lots and lots

some romantic abstraction of love never seems to be. I don't need roses and a candlelit dinner to get in touch with love in my life, it's there when I shop at my friend's convenience store on the corner, with the people I design websites with and talk about the news with and learn to bake bread from. At the end of the week, learning how doing things and feeling things can complement one another means that I get to do a whole lot more of both.

PENUMBRA



Labels and Intimacy – an Asexual's Perspective

It's common for people, young and old, to look for their identity in a label of some kind, to find a word that can define them. Particularly words that describe how they relate to other people. Think of a diagram of all the people you are close to, all of them arranged around you, connected in a web with you at the centre.

How would you structure it? Who are the people who are closest to the centre (to you), and in what way do you relate to them?

Most people's webs, I imagine, are neatly arranged with members of different social circles at set distances from the centre. I believe most people would, with good reason, place their family members close to the centre, with perhaps a significant other close by. This is the conventional set-up, the way modern Western society is ordered.

This web, of course, is a picture of the level of intimacy between you and others. The closer you are to a person, the closer they are to you on this imaginary diagram. Intimacy could also be described in terms of relating, and what sort of relationship you have with each

of the people in your web. The thing is, relationships are largely regulated and demilitarized by the labels we affix to ourselves and the people in our webs.

To explain this, let's look at the concept of intimacy. If we may take a rather binary view of things (which is how many definers are commonly split, rightly or wrongly) there are two types of intimacy: sexual and nonsexual. I expect that for most people, the type of intimacy they share with another person is determined by and large by how close they are to them.

Because you see, ours is a culture in which monogamy prevails. There's an unwritten law that only allows you to be sexually intimate with one person at a time, and this figure typically becomes a central figure in your web of relationships. And because of the supremacy of monogamy, this sexual intimacy is deemed the stronger kind, or else it is a given outcome of strong intimacy. It's given that sex is the most important attribute of intimacy – particularly in that it's the basis for forming a family, which is considered important enough to be a central feature of most people's webs.

"Think of the difference between friends and lovers. The implicit difference, as we are trained to see it, is sex. Do people really love their partners more than their friends?"

Sexual intimacy can't be shared with just anyone, however. That's where defining one's orientation comes into play, and it follows from my argument that defining your sexual orientation is defining who you may or may not love.

Think of the difference between friends and lovers. The implicit difference, as we are trained to see it, is sex. Do people really love their partners more than their friends? The expected answer is 'yes', because sexual intimacy is perceived as the strongest bond between two people,

tensions."

"I ache with what she can't bring herself to feel. She's beyond words, and most reality. And me. And though I've kissed her in the playground And held her through our tears, That's not what matters, or even what's real."

" You don't get it. Seriously. Your clear queer definitions don't apply – Those labels all around, unfoundedly you expound, Both severe and sincere, redefining me. Perpetually... unsuccessfully."

With two people very dear to me, I share relationships unique in both quality and intensity. No one else really understands. For a rough idea, consider that we're simultaneously more than friends, and just friends – in drastically different ways. But for something closer to the truth, we'd need to scrap every word describing people and what they mean to each other. I can't explain my relationships with this language. Sometimes I can't explain them at all.

For years, the expression "just friends" would invite one of my epic rants about how nothing's lacking in friendship. If you think you can take your relationship to the next level by deciding to become more than friends when you have feelings for someone, I would have to say you're deluded. Is friendship really so limiting that someone sharing in it can't be a soulmate?

The geek in me has long wondered if we're like atoms – do we get taken, bonding with another in some predetermined way, leaving us no longer single, available or free? If it's all about the chemistry, do you need just the right conditions to get things going, or will they heat up on their own? I suspect that love is an exothermic process, with high activation energy (unless there's a catalyst)... and that falling in love is like integrating over a point singularity. But I wouldn't know. Science aside though, it's no wonder people get confused when they say "there's nothing going on", and then "something happens." If they're going to talk about romance,

kissing and sex, they ought to drop the euphemisms. I've fought this language fervently. But now I'm reconsidering.

I'm reviewing my objections because I'm tired of being misunderstood. Apparently, for most people, a friendship is a second-rate relationship. If I introduce a "friend", will I undermine how much this person means to me? If I mention my best friend, now that I'm in my twenties, will people understand that I'm effectively talking about my other half? Or will they think of some sweet teenaged best friends forever pact, soon to be forgotten? At least by now most people are starting to believe the two of us actually won't ever get together. But in a very different way, we are together.

I'm also starting to figure out how very real the privilege is that people attain through sanctioned labels. A (romantic) partner is expected in so many spaces where a friend is forbidden. A boyfriend or girlfriend may instantly be welcomed as part of the family, when this same hospitality is extended slowly and painfully to a special friend who isn't a special friend. Or if I happen to be waiting at the hospital and the doctor asks if I'm her "...sister...?", will I have to leave if my friend-status is revealed?

Sometimes, though, even I need these words. How do I describe someone that I actually could be with if things were different – we would work out in so many alternate dimensions. I'm not talking about a hypothetical lover. How do I describe that kind of situation and convince people that if they're wondering about the physical stuff, they're completely missing the point? Maybe I throw a bad poem out at the world, and pretend I've said something meaningful. Will anyone believe that although I don't love people the way they do, I do love people? Or did I miss the part where love doesn't matter?

Just stop for a moment... You're about to ask the wrong question. Please, reconsider.

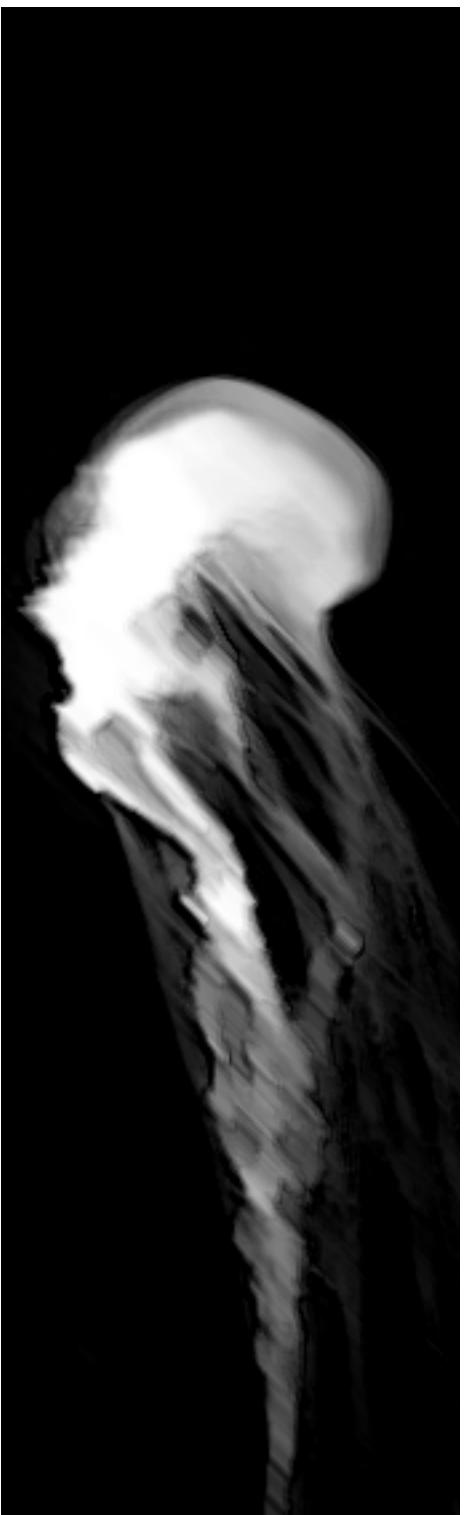
To talk about relationships, I've just used many common expressions. Some of these I normally avoid— I refuse to recognise their legitimacy— while others I've changed and given new meaning... because I can't live confined in this language. Can you?

Expressions I
don't
recognise:

just friends
take your relationship to the next level
more than friends
have feelings for someone
taken
single
available
free
all about the chemistry
get things going
heat up
falling in love
there's nothing going on
something happens
best friends forever
get together
boyfriend
girlfriend
"...sister..." (as a euphemism for lesbian lover)
friend-status
be with
work out
lover
the physical stuff

Expressions I've redefined:

soulmate
bonding
friendship
friend
best friend
other half
(romantic) partner
part of the family
special friend
love



Or can they?

Let's head to the kitchen. There my sister is making mashed potatoes, I'm prepping some mushrooms and my friend Poonam is musing around with sauce. Amy and Alex ring the doorbell with some wine, and when we finally sit down at the table we have, well, something of a paradox.

There's no doubting that the few hours we just spent together had some tangible economic value. Between the farmers market, the convenience store and the cheap wine aisle, the three course meal we're about to enjoy put us back around five bucks each. In raw economic terms, the labor that we put into preparing our food increased its value from five dollars to the roughly fifteen dollars (with tip) that we each would have had to throw down for dinner, wine and dessert at a restaurant down on Valencia St.

Of course added economic value seems like a fairly harsh way to talk about what all of us experienced as a couple of friends getting together and having a good time. As we were increasing the value of all of those mushrooms and spices we in some intangible way increased the value of our relationships with one another. We all had fun, we all got a little bit closer to one another and there was no rigid professional creed keeping the meal in check.

"In a very big way we are hard-wired to be social creatures, and we sustain and fulfill ourselves by forming rich, loving relationships with the people around us."

Of course, we could just go out to eat. It's almost always easier and faster to skip working with your friends and just buy things with them. After all, spending money together is at the heart of how we think about intimacy, from the classic date (dinner and a movie) to the classic family vacation (a hotel in Disneyland.) If all you care about is having fun with

people you care about then money (if you have it) is the way to go, it's just that stable intimate relationships are about a lot more than just having fun. There is a point where spending money on your relationships with people just doesn't make them any better. I'm reminded of my recent trip to Disneyland, where at least a few frazzled parents and kids seemed to feel like, as much as it had been custom engineered for optimum family fun, the most magical place on earth could stand to be just a little more magical. On some level parents paying to have their kids entertained aren't really getting any closer to them, and kids being paid to be entertained won't necessarily feel loved. Separating economics and emotion can be incredibly convenient. Worrying about making money all day at work and then going home to spend it on the people you love works pretty well, but there comes a point at which you simply can't squeeze any more love out of money.

Speaking personally, there's something missing, something hollow in relationships where all we do together spend money. On some basic level, I like to have other people around because they make my life better. Don't get me wrong, spending money with other people, whether I'm eating out or shopping or seeing a movie, tends to be more fun and more meaningful than just spending money by myself. If I couldn't spend money with other people, or show off the things I had bought with it or talk about the movies I bought tickets to money beyond what I need to survive would probably lose a lot of its point. Still, I've become extremely fond of those moments when relationships are both intimate and functional, when the people I love and I can be more than just conversationalists and co-consumers.

Disneyland has nothing on the magic of building something together, especially when that thing and the process of building it makes both of your lives better in some measurable way. When love takes a role in the economics of my day to day life it's, well, around in a way that

This is where traditional polyamorous thinking still falls flat. While polyamory is about loving relationships more than sex, and brings assumptions about jealousy crashing down, it still defines love mostly in terms of sexual partnerships. Nonsexual relationships rarely show up in polyamorous discourse, except in terms of sexual partners' other partners.

It's time to break down the barrier between sexual and nonsexual relationships. Love is love, and sex and love do not come wrapped in a neat package. Sexual monogamy is not incompatible with emotional polyamory. Most of us love multiple people, whatever words we use to think about them. If we can be conscious of our relationships, if we can be honest about our needs and our loves, if we can stop putting relationships in boxes, we can be better friends and lovers. Welcome to polyamory.



Home Cookin' and the Economics of Intimacy

There's nothing quite like a home-cooked meal. In an age when it's usually more efficient to just buy food and plop it on the table, there's some something that drives us to take extra time and make food with people that we love. We're used to thinking about relationships as emotional things, but they also have a certain sort of economic functionality. Every time we make dinner together we engage in a sort of emotional economics, at once exchanging goods, services and intimacy.

Relationships matter. In business they practically matter more than money. Take another look down the frozen food aisle and think about the sheer number of relationships that went into each item. (insert bit about love in the frozen food

aisle and think about the sheer number of relationships that went into each item. (insert bit about love in the frozen food aisle.) Whether in business or politics or entertainment, webs of relationships play a huge role in defining our world, and power tends to go to those who can build and maintain those relationships effectively.

There is a catch to all of these powerful relationships. Getting all of that stuff done tends to put a hamper on any sort of emotional intimacy. It's not that we're not allowed to feel things in our professional relationships, we're just not allowed to feel anything that might get in the way of transacting business. It's not always pleasant, but succeeding in any sort of professional environment means knowing how to take emotions out of the workplace and dump them somewhere more suitable.

That's part of why having a personal life is so important. At the end of a long day you can step away from all of those productive, emotionally dry relationships and cut loose. Our friendships and romantic relationships may not be raising any third quarter profits, but they let us explore a range and depth of human emotion strictly forbidden in relationships that have serious work to do.

And emotions, after all, are kind of the point. We spend all of that time slaving away in a professional environment in large part because we need money to spend on our loved ones. In a very big way we are hard-wired to be social creatures, and we sustain and fulfill ourselves by forming rich, loving relationships with the people around us. In these small communities of family and friends we are liberated from the harsh dictates of economic production and can focus on creating another sort of value. We can have fun, we can fall in love and we can have the sorts of experiences which make life a lot more meaningful than an earnings statement. Relationships, in other words, can either be emotional or they can be functional. They can't be both.



Religions of Interpersonal Love

For people who have strong emotions about nonsexual relationships or aren't that much into sexuality, it can often be difficult to understand why others express the strongest emotional connections only in familial or sexual relationships. It is often equally difficult for a "sexual" person to understand someone else who feels enormous passion about a friendship. Viewing people's feelings about human relationship as "religious" or "spiritual" is one way of better understanding what is going on.

Of course, the downside is that this involves adding in the fraught, controversial topic of "religion" into the already fraught and controversial subject of challenging assumptions about sexuality. In this article, "religion" simply means some combination of (1) direct mystical or transcendental experiences of connection with something larger than oneself and (2) a strongly felt belief in something that is scientifically unknowable. (If the word "religious" has unfortunate associations for you, feel free to substitute "spiritual"; this article is not advocating for or against a particular religion.) We all have these experiences and beliefs, since not everything can be scientifically knowable—even if we do not subscribe to a "religion" like Christianity or Buddhism. My two definitions of religion roughly correspond to mysticism and formal creeds in a traditional religion, and I believe both of them occur, and interact, in the "relational religions" that we are all practicing without even knowing it.

Although it may appear controversial at first blush to say that even non-churchgoing people have a "relational reli-

gion," in some ways people from across the political spectrum have already admitted it openly. For conservatives, heterosexual marriage is a sacrament, so that is clearly their form of "sacred sexuality"; a glance at any Evangelical church's web page will show you lists of gender-segregated Bible study classes and classes for different marriage-based stages of life. Sexual radicals are equally forthright: they hold classes at bisexual and polyamory conventions entitled "Sacred Sexuality" and talk about Tantra (an Eastern practice that explicitly mixes sex and spirituality). Probably liberals are the most reticent to discuss "sacred sexuality"; instead, they talk about "falling in love," and leave it for the listener to notice that they invariably fall in love with people who they are interested in having a sexual relationship with, e.g. compatible in terms of gender and orientation. I conclude that, surprisingly, all these very different modern religious viewpoints have something in common, namely, the belief that some kind of sexuality is sacred in a way that nonsexual relationships are not.

In this sense, one of the things that the asexuality and low-sexual-interest groups are doing is trying to expand this religion, or create a new denomination, so that nonsexual relationships can also thought of as potentially of equal spiritual significance.

Misunderstandings about Love and Religion

One of the interesting aspects of viewing relationship discussions as religious is that people have similar misunderstandings in both areas. As a not-very-sexual person I have often had people exclaim that I didn't know what love was, someday I would find "true love," or "how could I deeply love someone" if I had "only" friendships and no girlfriend or boyfriend. This reminds me a lot of when I left the Christian church and my relatives would sometimes ask me how I could know what behaviors were ethical without a belief in God. In both cases, the questions sort of flabbergasted me, because they were asked by people who knew me well and had, I thought, ample

evidence of my ability to love or be ethical. In the case of Christianity, my mother knew I spent years working for peanuts building affordable housing. In the case of love, my friends who asked me these questions knew that I felt strongly about my friendships and had even moved cross-country twice to be closer to certain of my friends, including one of the friends who were asking the question! This is one of the hallmarks of religious debate: factual discussion did not solve the misunderstanding because it wasn't really about facts for either of us. Both of us had subjective feelings and associated beliefs that we felt so strongly about that seemingly contradictory facts did not sway us. (This was true for me as well as for my friends—at the time I didn't know that there had been societies in which my intense attitude towards friendship was the norm, so I was ignoring the "facts" as I knew them, namely that nobody "fell in love" non-sexually, in favor of my experiences of life... only later did I find "facts" to back up my belief.)

Falling in Love as a Mystical Religious Experience
My friends and I were talking past each other most frequently about the concept of "falling in love." Like many things in the dominant "relationship religion," the official definition of falling in love does not mention sex, but it is commonly understood that it only happens either in sexual relationships or in gender/orientation-matched relationships that will be sexual sometime later. I think a decent, mainstream definition of "falling in love" would be "an intense feeling of fusion or one-ness with the other person." Some psychologists describe it as the loss of "ego boundaries," which is a variant on the "oneness" concept. The most interesting aspect of this definition is its close correlation with mystical or transcendental religious experience, like the "oneness with the Universe" sought in some Eastern religions, or the "oneness with God" sought in mystical Christian sects. Perhaps falling in love is like a smaller version of "Enlightenment"!

"Being in love" is usually defined as sort of the mature version of "falling in love" after the relationship has developed more—more of a warm than hot feeling, but with much greater endurance that can go on for years. When people describe these feelings to me, I can relate them to feelings I've had about certain friendships—I even have the requisite list of stupid things I've done after falling in love with someone—but people say "no, it isn't the same thing," when they find out that I did it in a nonsexual relationship. It isn't just that they argue that the other person didn't fall in love with me (a whole 'nother can of worms); they have argued that I didn't even know what I was feeling myself!

So how does sex—or marriage, exclusivity, or any of the other "practical aspects" of Anglo romantic relationship—enter into it? I think it is again very similar to how people have mystical or transcendental religious experiences (or "visions"). Almost invariably, they have a vision appropriate to the religion they've been taught—Catholics have Catholic visions, Buddhists have Buddhist visions, etc. A few people, even in the most repressive theocracies, have "rebellious" visions, inexplicably, and sometimes new religions are started as a result, but mostly, people see what they expect to see. I have even read that the same applies to near-death experiences. Putting aside the controversy about whether these experiences are a sign of life after death or simply a hallucination in the brain, people who have them and are then resuscitated seem to all have the tunnel and the bright light, but different things at the end of the light depending on their culture. Such is the way with "falling in love," I think, as well: most people, most of the time, when they have a transcendent feeling of love with somebody, have it in a situation and with a person whom society expects them to have it with.

This would explain why straight women in the early 1900's were frequently having "crushes" and "infatuations" on each other, as described in their writ-

that sexual love is uniquely spiritual, and those, like me, who think sexuality is optional. We need to be able to recognize the ways in which the notion that "serious love is romantic/sexual" is religious (i.e. not testable via science); then we need to recognize that people have been spreading this belief too much using the Aunt Betty style of assuming everybody will come to it eventually and those that don't are deficient somehow (but using the term "repressed" instead of "sinful"). Not-very-sexual people need to use a similar style of accepting that others may have transcendent experiences that do relate to sexuality.

Now, we're talking religion here, so there's nothing wrong with hoping that the other people will convert, or adopt parts of your faith! You just don't rub their faces in it. When we have achieved that ecumenical spirit, we can start learning from each other about the true breadth of the possible ways for humans to have transcendental feelings of connection to each other; and eventually, we probably will all broaden our beliefs about what is possible.



Everyday Polyamory

When some people think of polyamory, they picture group sex. Others imagine swingers who trade partners, or sluts who'll sleep with anyone. All these concepts frame polyamory, "loving many," in terms of sex and not love. Polyamory in practice is about love and fulfillment. It's based on a simple concept that polyamorists take as true: no one person can satisfy all of someone's needs.

In a sexual framework, this seems hedonistic. But in truth most couples aren't 100% sexually compatible. Two people may have different sex drives, or like different kinds of sex. This can cause major relationship rifts, and leave partners feeling unfulfilled, unloved, pressured or

inadequate. With open and honest communication between all partners, polyamorists can reduce jealousy and health risks of non-monogamous sex and make sure everyone's needs are met. Polyamorous relationships are faithful, just not exclusive.

But sexual polyamory isn't for everyone, and that's not what I'd really like to talk about. I'd like to get you thinking about polyamory in terms of love, and consider the various relationships in your own life. Instead of sex, think about social and emotional needs. Whether we have sexual partners or not, most people need stable friendships. In this era of serial monogamy where most people move from one sexual partner to another, nonsexual relationships often outlast sexual ones. We usually have more than one friend, and we accept that our friends have other friends without jealousy. We accept that they also have sexual relationships, as long as they don't eclipse their relationships with us. These social networks are the heart of everyday polyamory.

"Our language points to a gap between 'friends' and 'lovers,' but some friendships are very emotionally intimate. These are people we share our lives and thoughts with."

Our language points to a gap between "friends" and "lovers," but some friendships are very emotionally intimate. These are people we share our lives and thoughts with. The friends who play key roles in our lives are nonsexual significant others. Depending on how we define "romance," a friendship might be romantic whether or not it involves sex or sexual attraction. In the US today we don't talk about friendships as being "loving," but that's semantics. In Victorian England, men and women frequently spoke of nonsexual friendships with words of love.

What they don't realize, first of all, is that some types of Protestantism frown on a lot of other things besides sex, and many people continue to have inherited Protestant attitudes about these things. The result is that sometimes, from a not-very-sexual person's perspective, they appear to be the repressed ones! I ask myself why most Americans don't cuddle with their friends, why they don't dance at parties until they've had a few beers, and rarely touch anybody but their dates at dances, why they can't feel "really connected" to their closest friends even after years, why their emotional connections seem so dependent on gender and orientation. Why can they "only truly love one person"? Even the sex-radicals appear repressed to me, like a couple of gay men I know who can't cuddle with anybody who doesn't want to have sex with them. Perhaps the whole "repressed vs. liberated" continuum is not a good way to discuss this—none of us do all the possible activities it is possible to do in relationships, but does that mean we're all "repressed"?

By thinking of relational beliefs as religious, we accept that each person may have different beliefs and emotional associations with various types of relationships, leading them to do some things and not others. The various behaviors—opposite-gender sexuality, same-gender sexuality, nonsexual friendship, "emotional monogamy" (only "truly loving" one person), strictly sexual monogamy, polyamory—all have different meanings in each "denomination" of the relational religion. We can retain our own behaviors and meanings, while increasing our understanding by reading about other peoples' rituals and their meanings—just like liberal Christians can study Buddhism without (necessarily) losing or changing their religion.

Religious or transcendental feelings may explain some less-sexual people's life histories too, although it seems clear that simple lack of interest (physical or otherwise) is also a big factor. For me, it

started out with me discovering that I could feel "in love with" (as popularly defined) my closest friends in a way that didn't feel sexual to me, and maybe this just resulted from the chance occurrence of feeling strongly attached to people I was never going to be dating (one was an already-taken woman, the other was a straight guy). But after having this transcendental feeling of in-lovleness, people's discussions of "when was I going to fall in love" and "when was I going to discover True Love," etc., started feeling really insulting and it gave sexuality somewhat of a coercive feel that stays with me. It seemed to me that even if I did date to attain the practical benefits (not having your companions stop living with you when they get married, etc.), I would have to believe in it, namely, act like I also felt stronger about my romantic relationships than my friendships, have ceremonies celebrating only the romantic ones, say I "only truly loved" my partner or some variant on the phrase.

Some people, of course, probably don't expect that, and I should perhaps consider dating them, but it seems to be a frequent expectation that you believe in the superiority of romantic/sexual love, and this makes the whole concept of dating feel, to me, like going to church with a relative who still thinks you are going to "come back to Jesus." Anyone who has changed faiths or left the church as an adult has had this experience—your Great Aunt Betty or your mom insists that you go to the service whenever you visit, and enthusiastically belt out hymns about things you don't believe in. It gets old real fast, am I right? And it's not like I never enjoy attending church. When I go to a church service with my best friend, it is fun—because she doesn't expect that I will convert to the religion, or think I'm "sinful" for not doing so. So I can enjoy the ritual and the parts of the faith that do speak to me, without having to feel the pressure to fake enthusiasm over the parts that don't.

This is the way in which we will achieve understanding between those who feel

ing; it would explain why Alfred Lord Tennyson became a famous and admired poet in the homophobic early 1800's for writing a poem about a dearly departed male friend (including the famous line "'tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all") that would have probably been considered "gay" today. The "religion of relationships" at that time was different, and although homosexuality was unfortunately more taboo than now, emotionally effusive friendship was much more understandable to them. They could imagine someone having a transcendental experience of love with a same-sex friend, basically "falling in love" with them.

Unlike modern liberals, they couldn't imagine a transcendental experience in a physically homosexual relationship or a non-marital heterosexual relationship—they thought of those things as "sin." Apparently, rather than expanding to include all possible forms of transcendental feelings of connection, our culture has improved since then to be more accepting of alternative forms of sexual transcendence, but has unfortunately lost the feeling that nonsexual relationships can be transcendent.

Modern "Science" and the Religion of Relationships

As Lillian Faderman described in her excellent book *Surpassing the Love of Men*, the historical period where (same-sex) friendship was thought as a potentially passionate relationship came to an end, at least for American women, in the early 1900's with the rise of Freudianism and similar philosophies. (For American men, it happened a bit earlier, but let's focus on Freud for now.)

Some of Freud's ideas are now being recognized as non-scientific (in particular, his belief that women suffer from "penis envy" seems to have been more motivated by his anti-feminism than anything else). However, in general, one of the problems in expanding people's understanding about asexual and infrequently-sexual people is that people see

their beliefs as "scientific." Nietzsche once said that "the spiritualization of sexuality is called love," and a lot of people think that brain science has proved this somehow, and that resistance to this is basically futile: if you don't have sex, you don't "truly" love.

Of course, they aren't prepared for facts that contradict the supposed "science." One interesting thing that people do is to use Freud's concept of the unconscious mind in order to escape contradictory evidence. (I suspect there really is an unconscious mind, but one thing that seems to have made Freud less respected since his death is that he put anything he wanted—Oedipus complexes, penis envy, etc.—into the "unconscious mind" and how was anybody going to prove it wasn't really there? It's "unconscious" after all! You can't even prove that something isn't in your unconscious mind!) I remember one situation with an ex-boyfriend where I pointed out that affectionate and emotional male friendship was a normal custom in Brazil, and he said that the entire country of Brazil must be gay ("unconsciously" of course!).

Creating a More Comfortable Space for Discussing Nonsexual Passion, Using Religious Metaphors

I think that before we can have honest discussions with "sexual liberals" about asexuality and passion in nonsexual relationships, we will have to meld a discussion of religion with one of science: respect their transcendent experiences of love that happened to be sexual, while emphasizing the reality of our own transcendent experiences and pushing people to avoid cop-outs like getting around contradictory evidence through the use of the "unconscious mind." Then, in that open frame of discussion, we can use fun, scientific evidence to educate people about the possibility of additional mystical experiences of love that transcend sexuality.

In some ways, mixing a scientific and religious discussion is a better way to

introduce new facts to people because it allows them their beliefs and does not claim your beliefs as hard fact. For example, discussing the passionate same-sex friendships of Victorian times or of other countries doesn't just "prove that people can fall in love with their friends"; it also calls into question the notion that "straight" and "gay" are immutable categories (at least as concerns the important areas of emotion and nonsexual touching). Some people find this challenging to their own orientations! But if the subject can be discussed in the same way that liberals discuss their religious heritage, each person can still hold on to their own beliefs—the listener to Victorian history still finds spiritual significance only in their dating relationship for now—while accepting and learning from another set of spiritual beliefs. Liberal Christians are already used to learning from Buddhism and Earth-based religions; while agnostics like me, or Kurt Vonnegut, happily admit that our ethics are influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. This is similar!

Evidence from the Realms of History, Illegal Drugs, Wild Animals, and Dancing In the Streets

With that as the setting, discussing the "factual" evidence becomes a discussion of what it is possible for people to believe or experience, rather than what they should believe. And then we can bring out the fun evidence. There is lots of gossip from history to spread. Victorian straight, homophobic adult women wrote each other mash notes and had snuggly slumber parties even after they married monogamously. Their husbands thought it was admirable! Abraham Lincoln wasn't gay, but he did sleep with his friend Jonathan when he was single, but Walt Whitman probably was gay, but nobody really knows for sure since the definitions of gay and straight were in flux! Eleanor Roosevelt might have been bisexual, but equally well might have rebelled against the new (for her time) notion that love between women was sexual, and stubbornly held on to the notion of Romantic Friendship she learned from the New Women (femi-

nists) of the teens and twenties. Or maybe both! Emily Dickinson wrote unselfconsciously about same-sex love because the nonsexual version wasn't taboo at her time—but her heirs censored her writing because by that time the mood had changed! The ancient Greeks were as horny and bisexual as everybody thinks, but they still didn't think falling in love was sexual; even their god of wine and partying (Dionysus) was depicted as "indifferent" to sex. In other words, all he wanted to do was dance! But let's not limit ourselves to history and culture: there is interesting evidence in the world of illicit drugs and wild animals too.

I have not personally experienced the drug Ecstasy, and since it is illegal, I am hereby officially telling you not to experience it either. And yet, the Wikipedia article on it is interesting. It states that it is the "love drug," creating an intense feeling of attachment and connection to the other people nearby. The description reminds me of how people describe "being in love," except it is more communal. "Tactile sensations are enhanced for some users, making physical contact with others more pleasurable." But here's the kicker: "contrary to popular belief, MDMA does not necessarily produce aphrodisiac effects... MDMA is a love drug but not a sex drug for most people." In fact, some people become impotent and so the combination of XTC with Viagra ("sextasy") has come into existence! What that means for those of us who don't need Ecstasy to be cuddly, is that there is obviously some difference in the brain between the chemicals that are associated with emotional connectedness and physical affection, compared with sexuality—Nietzsche was wrong! Science will have to study this in-depth (presumably using government-approved "research" doses of Ecstasy?) but it is hard to imagine any other rational explanation for the effects that Ecstasy has.

I hope that by discussing illegal drugs at parties, all of my fellow not-very-sexual people will lose the "prude" image

that prevents people from accepting our experiences as real. After that, we can move on to the ever-popular party subject of what people's cats and dogs do! Temple Grandin's popular book *Animals in Translation* offers some further discussion of the biology of cuddling and "social attachment" and how it is distinct from sexuality despite some overlap. She reinforces everyone's common knowledge that animals are not just affectionate for sexual purposes. (Otherwise they wouldn't want us to pet them, and nobody would keep them around!)

People talk about how *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* would not allow a trait to be passed on if it wasn't about sex or food, and so they have a hard time understanding traits that are obvious to the casual observer, like altruism and cuddling. And yet dogs and cats go on cuddling, with us, or with each other, or with entirely different species on occasion. Grandin and millions of pet owners agree that animals have a kind of "friendship" too, equally inexplicable in terms of sex. Grandin thinks it has something to do with cementing group relations, and that groups are beneficial because they help prey animals defend themselves against predators. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her book *Blood Rites*, adds to this discussion by pointing out that long before humans learned to hunt, we were essentially claw-less, sharp-tooth-less primates—prey! She hypothesizes that both human sociability and war evolved out of our experiences of defending ourselves against predators such as (all together now) lions, tigers and bears (oh my).

Ehrenreich has another book that should be of interest to those exploring nonsexual passionate attachment, *Dancing in the Streets*. Here, she explores another nonsexual form of connectedness that has been repressed in recent historical eras, that of participatory, ecstatic dancing and "festival" (one modern example, since nothing ever gets completely repressed everywhere, is *Carnival in Brazil*). Although people obviously still party, I do feel she is on to something:

in dancing, people rarely touch except when they are dating or trying to "hook up"; dancing and mystical ecstatic communal trances are not part of most of our religions (unlike past religions); and people are used to having "professionals" (musicians, artists, actors) entertain them instead of doing it themselves.

In the past, she notes, both non-Western religions and ancient religions (like those of the Greeks) featured dancing, music, and ecstatic communal trance states; "festivals" like European Carnival upended the social hierarchies of class and gender for the few days they took place. She describes how the Protestant Reformation and other religious developments explicitly repressed these tendencies, and how modern scientists, influenced by their religious heritage, gave short shrift to emotions and experiences that were probably a big part of the human experience for most of history. The story of the decline of ecstatic festivity in *Dancing in the Streets* resembles nothing so much as the decline of romantic friendship in *Surpassing the Love of Men*!

Completing the Rebellion against Puritanism, by Attending Other People's Relational Churches

If I may close with another religious analogy, what we have in the liberal sections of America today is an incomplete rebellion against Calvinist Protestantism. Most liberals or their parents or grandparents were Protestants whose churches looked down upon all the pleasures of this world, and the 1960's rebellions rebelled against Calvinist/Protestant restrictions.

Sexuality was obviously repressed in the Calvinist and derived faiths, and so it was one of the most obvious things people rebelled against, and when they talk to people with lower interest in sexuality or lower sex drives, they tend to assume we are all Puritans. So we are "repressed" and they are not (usually their own inhibitions, such as a preference for monogamy or non-monogamy or a particular gender, are not included as "repression").