

Are We Ready for This?

We are here. We live among you, and have, some of us, for many years. And you have not known us. We are among your close friends and valued parishioners, but there are essential things about who we are that you probably have never known. Unless, of course, you are one of us, yourself.

We do have a name for ourselves, and a sense of community and empowerment. We call ourselves *polyamorous*. It is an odd word, mixing up Latin and Greek roots, but its meaning is pretty clear. It means “loving many.” A more explicit definition of polyamory is *the philosophy and practice of loving more than one other person at a time, sometimes also called responsible, intentional, or ethical multi-partnering*.

Quite often we think of our collections of lovers as families—open marriages, group marriages, line marriages, expanded families, intimate networks, or intentional tribes. And yes, there are children growing up right now in households where there are more than two parents.

We polys are a diverse community. There are no templates, no preconceived assumptions to guide us in structuring our love lives and our families. We are called on, quite consciously and intentionally, to make our lives up as we go along. Probably no two of our creations are exactly the same, and some of them look very different indeed. Some of us may have built up one family arrangement, tripped over something that didn't work for us, picked ourselves up, and tried something different. Then, too, some of us have lived very happily in the same basic mold for decades.

There appear to be three things that polyamorists do hold in common. The first is an awareness that the exclusive pair bond is not the only garden in which the flower of true love can blossom and thrive. The second is an experience that jealousy, common as it is, is not an unconquerable demon that inevitably destroys love and life. And the third is a reverence for integrity. Whatever odd arrangements we have set up in our love lives, they have been agreed to consciously and responsibly by everyone involved. Deception and cheating are as unpopular among polys as they are among monogamists—perhaps even more so. Coercion, domination, and abuse are anathema.

Over the past decade there has been a burgeoning in America of what might be called polyamory consciousness. One reason for this is that the very word *polyamory* was coined in the mid-1990s in an essay entitled “A Bouquet of Lovers” by a woman named Morning Glory Zell. Another reason is the Internet, through which polyamorous people who thought they were hopelessly alone in the world were suddenly able to connect with each other and develop a sense of community. And a third reason is the organizational and networking efforts of a group called Loving More, who have been holding annual polyamory conferences since the mid-1980s. Loving More publishes a national magazine on the subject of responsible nonmonogamy.

We don't know how many people now identify as poly, but it seems clear that our numbers are growing. Attendance at conferences is up, e-mail lists and websites are proliferating, and poly support groups are growing in number and size.

Something else that seems clear is this. A sizeable number of polys also identify ourselves as Unitarian Universalists. We keep running into each other at poly conferences and in cyberspace. There's an e-mail list for poly UUs which has over 300 subscribers. A national organization called Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness meets annually at the UUA General Assembly. There appears to be a kind of natural affinity between religious liberalism and lifestyle pioneering.

In Honolulu, the First Unitarian Church has had a polyamory discussion group meeting weekly at the church since 1994. The group's meetings are listed in the church calendar and the church directory of programs. A number of long-time church members have been frequent participants in the poly group, and a number of people from outside have become members and friends of the church through attending the poly discussions.

Elsewhere, polyamorous UUs have not found themselves quite so welcome. Proposals for adult religious education programs on multi-partner lifestyles have been rejected in some UU congregations. While some UU ministers have been said to perform joining ceremonies for polyamorous families, other ministers reportedly have refused to do so. The “Welcoming Congregation” movement has not yet appeared to take up any serious consideration of polyamory as an issue.

Yet, many polyamorists have been UUs for a long time. We have faith that our church will find a way to absorb one more element of diversity. The denomination has welcomed single-parent families and same-sex partnerships with and without children. How much more of a stretch is it to welcome

families where the partners may number more than two?

At this moment it seems important to poly UUs to make ourselves known in our denomination. Perhaps as the poly community has grown in size and strength we have crossed a threshold in our yearning for recognition and acceptance in our religious community. And perhaps, too, we are afraid.

Growth and visibility are a mixed blessing. As stories about multi-partnering show up in the mainstream media, we are concerned that we may become the center of the next great social justice firestorm in America. In Utah, a police officer was fired because it was learned that he was the kind of Mormon who still practices polygamy. He sued to regain his job, accusing his employer of religious discrimination. He was told by the judge that polygamy is not a religious issue protected by the First Amendment, and that monogamy is the very foundation stone of American civilization. Now, polyamorists condemn coercive relationships of any sort, and the patriarchal flavor of traditional Mormon polygamy makes many of us uncomfortable. Yet the idea that consensual polygamists can be legally persecuted for following their religious and moral convictions frightens us.

Closer to home for most of us, a woman in Tennessee had been living for some time in a triad household with two men whom she considered co-husbands. In late 1998 the woman's two-year-old daughter was abruptly removed from the home by a child protection agency at the instigation of the grandparents. A panel of court-appointed experts evaluated the situation and found the triad household to be a happy and

healthy home for the child with no hint of abuse, and recommended the child be returned to the mother immediately. The judge, however, declared that he knew what was right and wrong and that the child would only be returned if one of the co-husbands left the home. In the tradition of "The Lady and the Tiger," you are invited to guess what the mother will choose to do.

As more of these cases arise, and they will, where will the UUA and its congregations stand, especially knowing that a growing number of their members are making a conscientious choice for polyamory as their style of loving? To poly UUs the question is unavoidable and the answer crucial, and the time has come to open the dialog.

An alternative definition of polyamory could be *the principle of freedom and responsibility in choice of relationship style and family structure*. As polyamorous Unitarian Universalists, we are hopeful that all UUs, monogamous or poly, single or joined, gay, straight, bisexual, or transgender, can champion that principle.

How can I learn more?

Contact UUPA, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, at:

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Unitarian Universalists and Responsible Multi-Partnering

New Options For:

**Love
Family
Community**

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