

OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Have you ever entertained the idea of cheating on your significant other? Have you ever encountered some cute guy or girl who made eyes at you, and then wished, if only for a moment, that you weren't in a committed relationship? Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be able to have someone steady, and still have the permission to openly give in to temptation and lust, and not get in trouble for it? Such is the province of the open relationship ~ a growing part of the gay landscape.

What exactly is an open relationship? Basically it is a committed couple where both parties are free to fool around with other people, as long as they are safe and honest about it. Each person is granted the opportunity to engage in meaningless sex with someone else ~ someone who is fun for the moment but not necessarily someone with whom anything deeper will transpire. One-night-stands and purely physical encounters are allowed and forgiven, with the rationalization that if it's going to happen it is better to be honest about it.

Such a phenomenon isn't isolated to, nor did it originate within, the gay community ~ the freewheeling bacchanal of the 60's and the key-swapping swing parties of the 70's planted the seeds of today's open relationships. The debate over such couples now hinges on whether or not it's truly a path to greater intimacy and honesty, or just a form of sanctioned cheating.

For proponents of free love and hedonism, the idea is an appealing one. For open-minded liberal thinkers the notion is acceptable, if not something in which they would actively engage. And for close-minded conservatives the thought of an open relationship is abhorrent, repellant, and immoral ~ further ammunition in their crusade against homosexuality. Of course, nothing is ever completely right or completely wrong, and the issue of open relationships is extremely divisive, especially within the gay community.

There are those who feel that open relationships are a way of being totally truthful in every way – a closer form of intimacy and brutally honest love. The argument goes that it would be better to openly admit to our temptations and engage in a meaningless physical connection, then

come home at the end of the night to the one who really matters. It would, supposedly, afford a deeper understanding and form of intimacy, through complete honesty.

Why has such a trend taken hold in the gay community? One speculation has to do with gender. Men have long been considered the sexual rovers of the two genders ~ far more likely to cheat than women, and for two men together the odds for cheating would presumably double. Yet there are flaws in this explanation. Buried within it is the assumption that gay men as a whole cannot be faithful or monogamous ~ one of the arguments made against the case for gay marriage. It is the one major caveat in viewing the open relationship as the wave of the future. If we are to accept such relationships as the ideal have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too scenarios, we must be willing to accept the social ramifications such a movement might precursor. The men-as-pigs theory also falls apart when we examine the large number of lesbian couples who also engage in open relationships. So the question once again isn't so much one of sexuality or gender, but rather one of morality, and whether or not the open relationship brings us closer as partners.

I remember a lesbian couple whose relationship was an open one, albeit a largely one-sided affair. While they told one another everything, I often wondered if there wasn't something to be said to benign omissions. Their union managed to last seven years ~ a remarkable run in gay years, but I never figured out if its success, or ultimate failure, was based on its openness.

I know a few men currently enjoying and regretting their open relationships. For each couple that seems content and happy, there is one who seems unsure and miserable. Also, I have never known one that hasn't had a few terrible rows of resentment ~ they have all been touched by jealousy and betrayal in some way, and that, for me, is what seals the deal.

There are countless tales of long-term successful gay relationships that have survived years of open dalliances on both sides ~ survived perhaps *because* of such dalliances, and still I know it's not for me. I couldn't do that to my boyfriend, to our relationship, or to myself. Because in a way that's what love is ~ sharing things with one person that you would never shared with anyone else. Maybe it's too old-fashioned and sentimental for today's cynical times, but so be it. In such a scary world as this there is something to be said for feeling safe and warm, and in the end love is all that matters ~ whether your relationship is open, monogamous, homosexual, or heterosexual.