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## Multiple Choice

Rather than choose one husband, wife or lover, some people are creating extended families of intimate relationships. Polyamory is a lifestyle that's making its way out of the closet.

*By Pamela Griner Leavy*

Joan and Michael look to the outside world like a typical young upwardly mobile couple, living the good life in the suburbs of New Tampa. Michael, 29, is an engineer. Joan, a year younger, has a successful career in sales. In a traditional church wedding four years ago, they stood in front of family and friends and vowed to forsake all others.

While they are looking forward to having children someday, Joan and Michael are trying to jump-start a different kind of family. The couple is actively seeking another woman to bring into their home, into the intimate details of their lives, into their bed.

"We want a wife for both of us," offers Joan, who says she's been attracted to women, as well as to men, all her life. "When we started dating, Michael let me know having two women together was a fantasy of his. But it's not just about sex. We are looking for a loving, caring relationship, not a fling."

Carol and Liz live together in a quiet little cul de sac not far from an exclusive north Pinellas County bedroom community. A year ago, Carol, 38, a writer, poet and local performer, and Liz, 49, a high school English teacher, publicly proclaimed their union in a special commitment ceremony. They pledged their mutual love at the home of Ann, 43, who also continues to be Carol's sexual and emotional partner. "Ann cried tears of joy for Liz and me at the ceremony," Carol says of her other lover.

Living alone in a quiet rural section of Hillsborough County, Ann also has intimate relationships with Elaine and a man named Allen who lives outside of the Tampa Bay area.

Jim, 37, has lived in St. Petersburg with Ken, 50, whom he calls his husband, for the past 14 years. At first Jim was devastated when Ken fell in love with Mark, 39. But instead of breaking up, Ken, with Jim's blessing, established a second home with Mark. While all three men socialize together, Ken alternates his nights between each home. "I didn't want to be single again. I wanted to make this work," Jim says. All three men spend their time concentrating on what Jim calls "doing what makes them happy and unhappy, trying to make this a win, win, win situation."

These people are practicing polyamory. A lifestyle and lovestyle that's making its way out of the relationship closet.

The word polyamory means "many loves." Polyamorists, or polys, as participants like to call themselves, define their lifestyle as responsible non-monogamy. They firmly believe it is natural to love more than one person at a time, physically and emotionally. Any number of men and women can be entangled in a polyamorous relationship.

Traditional monogamous relationships between two people just don't work, claim the men and women involved in polyamory. They point to multiple marriages and divorces, the sneaking around, lying and cheating as proof of the deterioration of many marriages and living-together relationships.

Polyamorists believe that love can't be forced to flow or not flow in any one direction. Consenting adults should be able to consciously choose how many partners they want to engage with, rather than accepting arbitrary social norms that dictate loving just one person at a time.

Polys may have cracked the closet door, but they haven't flung it open. All of the Hillsborough and Pinellas men and women interviewed for this article asked that only first names, middle names or assumed names be used. They are afraid of losing custody of their children or having their kids bullied at school if a parent's name is recognized in the Weekly Planet.

There is the fear the landlord will knock on the door of their apartment in the middle of the night, telling them they have to get out because there's just one too many adults living or staying there. They don't want to be harassed out of neighborhoods or lose their jobs. Many have not told their families and are afraid of what their parents might think.

Polyamorists talk of a world of expanded intimate families, new styles of open marriage and open relationships, multipartner relationships that can be stable, responsible, nurturing, long-term, consensual and honest.

Elaine, one of Ann's partners, turned to polyamory because she wanted a better quality of intimacy in her life. The opportunity for personal growth and a sense of community appeals to the 35-year-old, a professional in the social service field.

"One of the things that attracted me was the aspect of having an extended chosen family," says Elaine. "Everybody is from somewhere else and often biological family is not around."

Elaine says her goal is personal growth. "I like to process. Relationships and all that fascinate me. I want to develop my capacity to connect with others, to have an interesting community, and a good, trusting relationship with Ann."

Carol, Liz, Carol's other partner Ann, and Elaine spent this past Christmas together. Now they are planning a weekend group retreat. A friend offered her country home so the foursome would have some uninterrupted time together. Group sex is not on the agenda and no one gets to watch. Liz has sex only with Carol. Carol has sex with Liz and Ann, but not in the same room and not at the same time. Ann has sex with Elaine and Carol, separately and privately with each woman. They may even decide as a family at the start of the retreat that no one has sex at all.

"We will set our limits," Ann says of her polyamorous family. "This is our first time on a retreat together, so the four of us will be experimenting with what works. We are going to align our expectations; each will have a chance to say this is what I expect to be uncomfortable with. We will negotiate the behaviors we want to witness. We will process what needs to be processed in each other's presence."

### **Process is a big word in the polyamory vocabulary.**

There are no dildo or sex toy demonstrations, no see-through teddies or crotchless panty fashion shows when the PolyTampa group meets one Sunday night a month. Carol and Ann founded PolyTampa in the fall of 1997 for men and women, married or single, straights, gays, bisexuals, atheists, pagans, agnostics, religious mainstreamers - anyone

who is looking for support in exploring non-monogamy. The location for what are called "safe space" meetings spreads through word of mouth and via a PolyTampa Web site.

Similar to encounter groups, 12-step recovery meetings and group therapy sessions, meetings of the approximately 20 polys and the poly-curious process participants' feelings, and give them a place to talk

about their polyamory life, and find additional partners. Instead of going out together after the meeting to a smoky bar and belting back a few beers, the Birkenstock sandals and jeans crowd gathers in the kitchen to get high off sugar cookies, herbal tea and vanilla-nut coffee.

If someone shows up at a PolyTampa event looking for casual sport sex, the "not welcome" sign immediately goes up. True polys see their relationships as both sexual and loving.

"Swinging" among strangers, neighbors, or casual friends - maximizing sexual pleasure while minimizing emotional involvement - is not what polyamorists claim they seek. This is not a game for scoring, as swingers say, "dick points."

Polyamorists say they don't judge those among them who have "fuck buddies," good friends with whom they may choose to spend a sensual and friendly night. That term is used in a book that polyamorists either love or hate *The Ethical Slut*.

The idea is that these relationships are not pickups in a singles bar. There is no cheating or lying because the other partners in the relationship are aware of what is going on, more likely than not know the person their loved one is spending the night with, and welcome the opportunity to have a night alone to color their hair, work on their computer, or polish their toenails.

What polyamorists say separates what they are doing from swinging, group sex, free love, communal living, open marriage and polygamy - the male dominated, patriarchal model of taking multiple wives common in the Bible and made famous by the Mormons - is their ability to process challenging issues, honesty, the forming of families, the concern for each other and trust.

Swinging and cheating are not on the menu for Michael and Joan as they search for the perfect wife. At Michael's insistence, the couple has a concrete written set of rules to live by. While they consider themselves open and flexible, Michael doesn't want to do anything that would make Joan uncomfortable. Even though he's allowed to be "more flirtatious than most," he's not allowed to have a sleepover at someone else's house on a Saturday night.

"We are not out looking so much for just sex partners," emphasizes Michael. "We are looking for an equal third of our relationship."

"Polyamory is about much more than sex," stresses Brad Blanton, author of the nationally published book *Radical Honesty: How to Transform Your Life by Telling the Truth*. "It's about relationships, whether you fuck or not doesn't make a difference."

The work required for a polyamorous relationship is the same required to make any life worth living at all, Blanton said in a recent interview. The author, who has appeared on ABC's "20/20," NBC's "Dateline," "Montel Williams" and the "Sally Jessy Raphael" television shows, sees too many people today as disenfranchised because the myths we have been fed as a culture about marriage and family are dead.

"We have to reinvent relationships, families, even marriages," Blanton says. "People have the right to choose rather than follow the dictates of a reactionary Judeo-Christian society."

The women and men choosing polyamorous relationships see themselves "as souls who have matured beyond a blind acceptance of monogamy as the only legitimate form of sexual love and who are pioneering new relationship territory," says psychologist Deborah Anapol, the author of *Polyamory, The New Love Without Limits*.

That territory lacks the well-known landscape of traditional relationships. The variations are limited by little more than imagination.

Ann, for example, identifies herself as bisexual and a feminist. She likes living alone because it gives her more time for "introspection" and her work as a human rights social activist. Ann tries to see her local partners, Carol and Elaine, once a week, and every other month she gets together with her out-of-town partner, Allen.

There are no hard and fast rules between Ann and her three partners. She does have a process to follow if she decides to get involved sexually with another person. She would not do that without discussing the possibilities with

Carol, Elaine and Allen in advance. "I would take their thoughts and feelings into consideration," says Ann.

Like every poly person interviewed for this story, Ann says she is careful. "Of course, I would use safe sex if I ultimately did relate with someone new."

Loving More, a slick magazine, is the bible and how-to manual of the polyamory culture. Published quarterly since 1984, it's hard to find at mainstream and adult bookstores but readily available over the Internet. While circulation is approximately 3,000 and the Web site registers about 10,000 visitors a month, exposure for the polyamory publication is growing. According to co-editor Ryam Nearing, Playboy, Mother Jones and Bikini magazines are working on articles about polyamory and have contacted the Loving More editors.

Playboy actually sent a writer to Loving More's annual East Coast conference last August in the Catskill Mountains of New York. According to co-editor Brett Hill, the conference is for polys to get together and meet each other, to feel they aren't alone in the world, to "affirm" each other. A West Coast conference is scheduled earlier in August in Berkeley, California.

"In the mainstream culture polyamorists are not affirmed at all," says Hill. "You are told 'Something is wrong with you. You need therapy. You are not emotionally well.' We have the reverse view. There's so many ways to do relationships. It's silly to think there is only one way to do it and be responsible."

"These are not sex-obsessed groupies without a life outside the boudoir," Elizabeth Larsen wrote in the Utne Reader's November-December 1998 issue of the "still-young" polyamory movement. Larsen pointed out that "very unscientific impressions would suggest polyamorists tend to be professionals, artists, academics and other highly educated people with a strong showing among computer professionals or others with computer interests."

Polyamory has also been featured on MTV and on the pages of Rolling Stone and Jane, a 1990s version of Cosmopolitan aimed at 16- to 25-year-old Generation Y high school, college and career women. At least 2,000 Web matches pop up during a polyamory search of the Internet.

"I believe in redefining the family at a very basic level by recognizing that love can extend beyond one person," says Alexis Sainz, 24, a field organizer for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Sainz identifies herself as Cuban Colombian/second generation bisexual who is also bi-transgendered/polyamorous.

From her office in Washington, D.C., Sainz defined transgendered as "an overarching term that moves beyond the boundary system of female and male gender." While transsexuals - those who have had sex change operations, modify their sexual identity with hormones or dress in the clothes of the opposite sex - are included in the term, some young people are seeing transgendered as a way to embrace their feminine and masculine sexuality without defining themselves as male or female.

"Polyamory speaks to me, the love and caring I have for more than one person at a time," Sainz said. "I see monogamy as exclusion."

Calling monogamy one big myth, Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits points out that in a recent survey the number of married people willing to admit to extramarital affairs ranged as high as 70 percent for men and 50 percent for women. The cheating and deceit often lead to divorce. Then there are the serial monogamists, men and women who divorce and remarry repeatedly, unable to sustain a long-term relationship with one partner.

The PolyTampa organization "came out" in the fall of 1997 at Circus McGurkis, the St. Petersburg Quaker community's annual Halloween tribute to love and peace. The PolyTampa Internet site is out on the World Wide Web. Carol, her partner Liz, her other partner Ann, and Ann's other partner, Elaine, stood up and told their stories this

January at the St. Petersburg Salon, a monthly south Pinellas County gathering of lesbian and bi-sexual women.

Still, they are fiercely protective of their privacy. While Carol and Liz say it's OK to come out as a gay or lesbian at some workplaces, it's not OK, as Carol phrases it, to act too "dykey" or "faggy" or, heaven forbid, to be open about being polyamorous. "If your supervisors don't like you, they will find a way to get rid of you," adds Liz.

Although the lifestyle boasts of new-found freedom, never-before-experienced openness and total honesty, acceptance by close friends and relatives is a major consideration. In a southern California beach community just north of Los Angeles, Sheila lives with Bob and Erma, her intimate partners for 15 years. While Bob and Erma are legally married to each other, Sheila, 52, calls Bob her husband and sees herself as an equal marriage partner, not the odd woman out. "Bob's mother used to call me her son's 'whore,'" says Sheila, who has lived a multipartner life for the past 25 years. "She was the toughest nut to crack, but now she's starting to come around and is civil and pleasant to me."

And, Polyamory isn't something adherents tend to broadcast. Although Sheila, a public school teacher for 23 years, doesn't hide her relationships, "it's not what I would call putting it on a billboard or anything. I have taken my partners to work functions and have introduced them as my partners, but I don't stand up and announce 'I am married to two people.' I find that's pretty inflammatory."

A triad, the polyamory term used to describe three people involved with each other in a committed intimate relationship, describes Sheila and her partners Erma and Bob. While Erma and Bob are legally married, all three mix their finances and jointly own their home.

"Be very afraid," Sheila cautions other polyamorists. "Be very afraid of losing your job and losing your kids." Consult a liberal lawyer is her advice. Polyamorists need to know where they stand when it comes to wills, power of attorney rights, home ownership and above all, custody of children.

April Divilbiss, 21, is married to Shane, 24. They share their home and sex life with Chris Littrell, 22. Last December, MTV did a documentary about polyamory and interviewed the Tennessee triad, an example of a woman and two men living together in a poly relationship. It was not mentioned on the show that April Divilbiss had custody of a 3-year-old child from a previous relationship. The day after the show aired, the child was removed from the home by state social service officials because of the "immoral" lifestyle of the mother.

Although the child's father was aware of the child's living situation and did not object, the child's paternal grandparents found a cooperative judge and took immediate legal action.

Loving More magazine has established a child custody legal defense fund. About \$12,000 has been raised, all of it sent to Tennessee. "Aside from the horrific reason that a child can be taken away from her mother, we don't want this case to set any kind of legal precedent," co-editor Ryam Nearing says. "The only thing

the authorities found wrong with the home is the mother's committed relationship with her two partners. We don't want the fact there's three loving adults in the house to be a reason to have kids taken away."

Credit for creating the term "polyamory" goes to Church of All Worlds founders Oberon and Morning Glory Zell. They did it to replace the awkward sounding "responsible nonmonogamy." Living high in the hills of northern California, the Zells, married to each other for 25 years, publish the Green Egg, a Journal of the Awakening Earth, a neopagan publication. Morning Glory and Oberon are the core of a polyamorous family, a five-person multimarriage of two women and three men, ranging in ages from 19 to 55.

Margo Adler, New York bureau chief for National Public Radio, had a very brief polyamorous relationship with the Zells in the mid 1970s. Documented in Adler's 1997 book *Heretic's Heart, A Journey Through Spirit and Revolution*, Adler quickly realized polyamory and group sex weren't the long-term relationship styles for her.

Successful polyamory relationships take a lot of work, Adler says. "Love and sex are an important part of their lives, and they are willing to put in a lot of energy. I am not willing to put in that kind of energy. I am middle-class; if I have sex once a week I am amazed. I want to have a safe, lovely relationship with one someone. Polyamorists spend a lot of time talking about issues of psychological depth, pushing people's buttons. I don't want to spend time on this. I want to spend time on other issues, on ideas in the world."

In 1967, Adler was a student at the University of California at Berkeley. She found herself, along with about 100,000 other flower children, in the Haight Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco during what has come to be known as the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll "summer of love."

"Just a lot of bodies merging," is Adler's remembrance of the "free love" sexual atmosphere of the 1960s. "Polyamorists are intimate groups of people who know each other. In the 1960s it was often anonymous and superficial."

Carol, the cofounder of PolyTampa is on a different kind of search for herself, Liz, Ann, Elaine and any other polyamorists who care to join them. She's looking to convert an old motel or a piece of property in the country into an "intentional" polyamory community with common living rooms, kitchens and libraries. The bedrooms would be private.

Intentional means the women and men involved would all help support each other - living simply, sharing food, clothing and other resources. They see polyamory as a wave of social change that would make a better future.

Liz, the primary live-in partner of Carol, is interested in sleeping only with Carol. Liz is one of the few polyamorists who concedes jealousy can be an issue.

Right now Liz has Carol six nights a week. On the seventh night, Carol spends the night with her other partner, Ann.

What if they are all living together in a motel or country house and Liz has to watch Carol going down the hall to bed with Ann or another partner? "It would be difficult for me to see her go off with someone else in the same house," admits Liz. "I am a newbie to polyamory. I am not to that place yet. However, one of the great pleasures in my life is seeing happiness on Carol's face."

Carol compares her polyamorous life to her 16-year traditional marriage, one she remembers as isolating and lonely. "My life got smaller and smaller as a married woman, and I didn't even realize it. I am committed to living a wide-open life and making it expansive."