Relationships

MJ Barker

Introduction

Welcome to my free book on relationships. These free books are collections of the pieces and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

Note that some of these pieces were written over a decade ago now, and before many of the most profound shifts that the world - and I - have recently been through. I hope that it is of interest to see how my ideas have evolved over this period. But please do be mindful of the context in which they were written as they may not always represent either my own, or culturally current, thinking/practice on these topics.

If you enjoy the book, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

- **patreon.com/MegJohnBarker**
- **paypal.me/MegJohnBarker**

Contents

Love 101

All about amatonormativity: the privileging of romantic love

April 2020

What is amatonormativity?

Amatonormativity is a long word which philosopher Elizabeth Brake came up with. It means that, in our culture, it's seen as normal for people to want romantic love, and to prioritise that kind of love over other kinds. Other kinds of love include things like the love we have in friendships, family relationships, work and play relationships, and relationships with ourselves and with companion animals, our communities, the world around us, and our spiritual beliefs. 'Amato' means romantic love and 'normativity' means what's seen as culturally normal.

Amatonormativity is linked to several other kinds of 'normativity': heteronormativity (where it's seen as normal to want relationships with someone of the 'opposite gender'), cisnormativity (where it's seen as normal to be one of only two genders – male and female – and to stay in that gender all your life), mononormativity (where it's seen as normal to only love one person and to want a monogamous relationship with them), and sexual normativity (where it's seen as normal to want to have sex, generally only with the person you're in a romantic relationship with).

To make it simpler we could say that the overall 'norm' is to be in one gender yourself, to fall in love with someone of the 'opposite' gender (perhaps after dating a bit), and to form a monogamous relationship with them where you have sex and get more and more committed over time (the relationship escalator): getting married, having a family, and trying to stay together for life.

What are the different ways it affects everyone in society?

Amatonormativity affects everyone: the people who don't fit into it and the people who do.

The people who don't fit into amatonormativity include people who are single or solo, people who are aromantic so don't experience romantic love, people who prioritise other kinds of relationships in their lives, and people who prioritise many relationships rather than just one – like polyamorous people and relationship anarchists. Other people who don't fit into

amatonormativity are people from cultures where marriage and other committed relationships aren't based on romantic love, which is actually people in many cultures around the world.

Some people don't fit amatonormativity because they've realised it doesn't work for them. It's hard for them because the world around them assumes they will want romantic love and may discriminate against them or make them feel weird or isolated for being 'different'.

The people who *do* fit amatonormativity often have a hard time too. Because there's so much cultural pressure – and pressure from friends and family and peers – to want romantic love and to focus on it obsessively, people often miss out on other great things in life like friendships and projects and community.

Also the huge pressure on a romantic partner to be 'everything' to you and 'complete' you and be your soul mate who meets all your needs means that most romantic love relationships often don't work out long term. It's just too much pressure to be someone's best friend, and their lover, and the person they live with and have kids with, and their cheerleader, and the person who looks after them when they're sick or struggling.

People can end up staying in really unhappy relationships because they're scared to be alone in an amatonormative world, and they can end up breaking up with one person after another and getting really hurt by that because they're so busy searching for someone perfect.

Is there anyone it particularly affects?

Amatonormativity particularly affects those of us who are trying to do relationships differently because we've realised some of the problems with basing relationships on romantic love. While we might try to prioritise the other relationships in our lives, we may still find that our friends prioritise their romantic relationships and drift off as soon as they have a partner, or spend more time on dating than on friendships. Or they might find it weird to talk with us about how we might make commitments in our friendships.

Amatonormativity also affects people with trauma in their backgrounds – which is many of us. Romantic love can be quite risky when we have childhood trauma because it's very easy to jump into relationships quickly and to try to get the kind of love there which we were missing – or lost – as a kid. Again that's a lot of pressure to put on one relationship, and we can often end up getting hurt because painful patterns come up in intense romantic relationships and we can become very dependent on them.

Some neurodiverse people can struggle with amatonormativity because romantic love type relationships don't give us the space we might need, enough solo time, or can just be too intense for us.

Finally, some people would say that amatonormativity – with its focus on one romantic relationship – isn't so good for disabled people, or people with physical and mental health conditions, or even for parents, where being an isolated unit of just two people can be a lot of pressure. Perhaps community-based models and extended family structures where there are networks of people looking out for each other can work better when we need care and support.

Focusing on young people specifically, what expectations does it set and how might it harm them?

For young people amatonormativity can mean that a lot of your focus goes on love relationships, particularly for girls who are still taught in stories and movies and magazines that love is their big adventure in life. When that message is all around you it can seem to make sense to spend a lot of your time longing for love, talking about the people you fancy, dating or hooking up. That can feel like the most fun and pleasurable thing in life. But what would it be like if we lived in a world where mates were seen as just as important as dates, where we were taught how to enjoy our relationship with ourselves rather than being so hard on ourselves all the time, or where we were expected to get just as excited about the things we're passionate about as we do about the people we're into?

If you're a young person who doesn't fit into amatonormativity there can be so much pressure to do so. You can end up being bullied for being weird and different if you don't talk about who you fancy or get off with people, and you can end up feeling like an outsider or like there's something wrong with you if romantic love isn't something you're interested in, or if it doesn't seem to happen for you.

That's why the idea of amatonormativity is really helpful. It reminds us that prioritising romantic love isn't really the normal, natural, right thing to do. It's just one thing we can do, and it might not even be a very good idea for all the reasons we've talked about.

Online communities can be a lot of help for finding other people who do things differently, and it can be good to see a counsellor if anyone is giving you a hard time. Website like BishUK and Scarleteen both have great advice for young people about relationship diversity.

Do you think there are structural things that favour couples, or privileges that come with being in a romantic relationship/marriage that are related to amatonormativity?

One of the reasons it's so hard to be outside amatonormativity, or to resist it if it doesn't work for us, is because the whole of society is set up like it's the One True Way to be. People who get married are given lots of legal and financial and health support that people who are in other kinds of relationships don't get. It's often much easier to get a house together if you are a romantic couple than if you're in another kind of relationship with one or more other people.

People who have kids together are often not recognised as valid parents unless they're romantic partners.

Outside of these practical problems, cultural messages are So Strong that we should want romantic love and settle down with a romantic partner. It's literally the 'happy ever after' of most fairy tales, movies, and novels. It's also the focus of loads of magazines, soap operas, and reality TV shows like *Love Island* or *Love is Blind*. This means most people just accept amatonormativity and everyone from our mates to our families are probably assuming we'll want romantic love and are pressuring us to date, especially around events like proms and weddings, or at times like Valentine's Day and holiday seasons.

'Couple privilege' is a phrase for the many ways in which it's easier to be in our society as a couple than it is as somebody single or in another kind of relationship. Couples never have to explain why they want to be together or stay together, whereas people who are single are always asked to explain themselves, as are people who leave romantic relationships, or who decide to prioritise other kinds of relationships.

Do you think society is changing in terms of amatonormativity?

I hope so. In 2012 my book *Rewriting the Rules* came out, which suggested that we could question the love rules that prioritise romantic love over other kinds of love. Eight years on we now have a word for this: amatonormativity, and people are having these kinds of conversations more widely. There are also more and more words and communities for people who want to do things differently like solo poly people, self-partnered people, relationship anarchists, aromantic people, etc. Popular TV shows like *Modern Love* have started to portray lots of different kinds of love rather than just romantic love.

However, at the same time, the mainstream media seems increasingly obsessed with people at a young age finding The One and getting married to them. Look at all the massively popular reality TV shows where winning is based on falling in love and making that commitment.

It's a bit like what's happening with sex and gender. At the same time that we have asexual communities questioning why there is so much pressure to be sexual, we also have more and more cultural obsession with having 'great sex' and 'experts' insisting that it's vital to have sex. At the same time that we have non-binary people questioning why people are divided into men and women, there's also a lot of cultural pressure to be a manly man and or a girly girl and 'experts' insisting that gender is binary.

What can we do to be less amatonormative or how do we get rid of amatonormativity?

It is So Hard to step outside of culture so go gently with yourself. If you see the problems with amatonormativity then it's a great idea to be part of communities of other people who feel

similarly in order to get support. Finding online and offline communities of other people who want to do relationships the way you do is a great plan. You might also read some of the books and zines out there which question amatonormativity and offer alternatives. I hope my book *Rewriting the Rules* is a pretty good place to start.

For me one of the answers to how to do things differently has been to slow down all relationships. These days I tell everyone that I want to be friends first. In fact I aim to have a friendship for at least a year before I consider adding anything to it (whether that is sex or romantic love or working together or living together). New Relationship Energy or 'falling in love' is a major feature of amatonormativity and I think it's a great idea to slow that right down, because it generally isn't a great basis to build a whole relationship on.

Do you also happen to know if any cultures across the world are not amatonormative?

Actually all cultures around the world do love differently. More cultures are some form of non-monogamous than are monogamous, and many cultures base marriage or committed relationships on some kind of family and/or financial arrangement, or on choosing a good fit, rather than on romantic love (although that can develop over time in such relationships). If we don't want to impose one view on the rest of the world – as we have in the past – we need to get on board with relationship diversity.

Hot love: Being and having

September 2019

A good friend recently asked me what I think about hot love: that intense in-love feeling. What does it mean when we feel that, and what should we do about it?

The wider cultural sense of it seems to be that it's one of the best experiences we can possibly have. Perhaps *the* best experience. The thing to do with it is to build a whole relationship upon it: clearly the person we have such feelings for must be our true love or The One and this means they're also the person who should become our best friend and the person we have sex with, live with, commit to more than anybody else, and build a life and family with. It's also important to keep the hot love alive in that relationship over time: the passionate, in-love, erotic and romantic feelings. Struggling to do this is seen as some kind of failure. Even some communities that question the cultural norms of romantic love – like polyamous and sex positive communities – seem to accept that the thing to do with hot love is obviously to go for that relationship.

I've written a fair bit in *Rewriting the Rules* and elsewhere about the issues with putting that much pressure on any one relationship. I've also explored Esther Perel's theory that we can't get warm love and hot love in the same place over time, so that idea of keeping hot love alive sets us up to fail (but ensures that the sex and relationship therapy and advice industries do rather well!) I've also written before about New Relationship Energy and what that might open up and close down, which is a similar idea to hot love.

But what of hot love? Where does it come from and what might we do with it?

Having and being love

I recently read an excellent book by Erich Fromm called *To Have or to Be?* which is helpful on many things, not least on what we need to do in order to avoid the destruction of humanity (the fact he was writing all this back in the 1970s though makes for some painful reading).

Basically Fromm talks about how we can do pretty much everything in 'having' mode or 'being' mode. Having mode is when we're trying to get something for ourselves, and being mode is when we're present and open to the experience. Of course the capitalist culture which we're embedded in is all about having mode – trying to get more and more of what we want, and none of what we don't want. Fromm's sense of what we need to do is to move – individually and culturally – towards being mode, and he offers a combined Marxist, Buddhist, and Psychodynamic path for how we might do that.

What has that got to do with hot love? I think when we experience hot love it's often a combination of a having kind of love *and* a being kind of love: like two interwoven threads through the hot love experience.

Having love

We all have our childhood – and later – wounds, attachment issues, traumas, patterns – whatever you want to call them. Hot love often seems to come when there's some kind of fit between our's and the other person's that we recognise on some – perhaps unconscious – level. Maybe it seems that we're finally getting the kind of love that we lost as a child. Perhaps it feels like there's a promise or potential to play out our early patterns differently. All of this occurs within a wider intense cultural promise that romantic/erotic love will save us. So we're drawn to hot love: to immersing ourselves in it and to escalating it to make it a main relationship.

Of course our bodily responses come into all of this as well, making the hot love experience yet more overwhelming. Our nervous systems and neural pathways seem to recognise these familiar dynamics, drawing us in. The experience of strong erotic desire – and/or of nurturing and being nurtured – results in various hormonal reactions that intensify the experience.

However, chances are high that our patterns will play out in similar ways to the past if we're not aware of them, and perhaps even if we are. It's particularly risky if – on some level – we're looking outside ourselves for somebody else to fix that stuff. It's easy to approach the relationship in a having kind of way – wanting all of that promise and none of the toughness that will inevitably come with being confronted with our old patterns, habits, and pain again.

Being love

We all have the capacity for the more being kind of love. In fact Fromm – like bell hooks – questions whether the having kind of love should even be called love. He says that love isn't a thing we can fall into, or a feeling we can have. It's an action that we do when we're acting in a loving way towards someone or something. The having kind of love is not really very loving at all.

Being love is real kindness and care for the self and others: being alongside each other, accepting and loving all that they are and all that we are. Hot love can give us a glimpse of this kind of love, as if we just tapped into the source. Perhaps hot love is one of the main experiences in life when we really feel that capacity for being love: our connectedness to ourselves and the other person, a sense of knowing that we are okay (because we feel so loved) and they are okay (because we feel so loving towards them).

But it's so easy to drop from being to having mode with this kind of love because we want so much to keep hold of it. Quite quickly we may try to alter the very relationship which enabled this

being love experience to happen because we want to get *more* of this feeling. This actually risks us getting less and less of it.

So what do we do about hot love?

If the having and being kinds of love are intertwined in the hot love experience should we run a mile from it, or embrace it? Or both? Or something else entirely?

Personally I think it is worth being cautious, recognising that the force behind hot love is often this very consuming yearning that comes from needs and desires that haven't been met in our lives, whipped up by chemical reactions and cultural stories which encourage us to look to erotic and romantic love in particular to meet these yearnings.

Generally when we feel hot love we don't know the person well, and we have no idea whether we'd be compatible in various ways, or enrich each other's lives. We're going on a feeling which is likely in large part projection of our stuff onto them and the hope of what they might be for us (the having kind of love).

The popular idea is that we only feel hot love for certain people, so those are the relationships that we should go for. There's an argument that the opposite is true. While such relationships definitely give us the opportunity to see where we're stuck and what our yearnings and patterns are, the old dynamics and intense feelings can make them hard places indeed to see clearly and to separate off enough to work on that stuff in ourselves.

I think it's worth disentangling the people we feel hot love for from all other aspects of relating, like who we spend time with, have sex with, build family with, cohabit with, work with, etc. If we can see all of these as different strands then we can intentionally decide which relationships are compatible in the best ways to do these things: in ways that enhance, enrich and expand the experience of all the people involved.

Then we can see hot love as hot love: separate to all that other stuff, and decide if and how we want to engage with it. If we do engage with it I'd suggest doing so with our eyes open: recognising it for what it probably is and slowly and creatively engaging. Ideally we'd have no expectations or assumptions about the shape it would take, and a lot of space to keep reflecting on what it brings up for us.

What about hot love showing us our capacity for being/doing love?

But if hot love is one of the – perhaps few – places in life where we can realise our capacity for that other kind of love – the being kind – shouldn't we go for it in order to experience and enhance our ability to do that? Surely we should be all about expanding our ability to love others

and ourselves in ways that see all of them, offering kindness and care, and not treating each other as objects (like having love does)? As Fromm points out – this is essential given the current state of the planet and the way we mostly all treat one another: on the individual level of interpersonal conflict and abuse, and on the cultural level of valuing some lives, bodies, and labour way more highly than others.

Personally I think it's more about nurturing that capacity for being love in *all* of our relationships, including our relationship with ourself. Maybe it is partly because our culture is so stuck in having mode that we only experience being love so fleetingly, and only at certain times like when we fall in love, or share an intense experience in a crowd, or perhaps when we feel love for a child or companion animal.

Perhaps we can see those kinds of experiences as giving us a useful sense of what being love *can* be like, so that we can start the slower, longer process of cultivating that capacity in ourself and bringing it to all of our relationships and projects. It's a bit like being helicoptered up to the top of the mountain to see the view, and then back down to the bottom to start the climb.

Another metaphor that occurred to me is being given a candle with a flickering flame. In having love we're so grateful for that flame, and so frightened of losing it again, that we hide it away in a dark room and huddle around it with another person to get the small amount of heat and light that it gives off. But an alternative would be that we could use that flame to light a whole bunch of sticks and create a fire. We could keep feeding and nurturing this with others so that the fire keeps going, and keeps way more people warm.

One thing we know for sure about hot love is that – like the candle – it will eventually, inevitably, flicker out. Either the relationship will turn into a different kind of relationship (like a warm, companionable, kind) or it'll end. And if we go more and more into having love then either we'll have to break up or remain in something much more challenging, recognising our old issues of rejection, abandonment, feeling trapped or unsafe, for example. I recently read someone suggest that whether a relationship breaks up or remains together, the things that the people in it will be confronted with – and the work that they'll be called upon to do if they're up for it – is pretty much the same.

But if hot love brings us up against our stuff isn't that a good, useful thing?

In a way it is. I think it's always useful to see where we're stuck or hooked. It gives us the opportunity to work on that stuff in ways that free us up, leave us more real and humble, and more able to love and be loved in that being mode. But given the ways we tend to engage with hot love – and the cultural promises that are attached to it – it's really hard to see what it reveals to us as any kind of gift, or to engage with these hard hard lessons.

When we're in the having mode of love the initial wonder, joy and pleasure at finally having our yearnings met (being seen, approved of, or desired, finding safety, etc.) are the flip side of eventually not having them met because we've put them all on this one relationship and asked too much of it. That can be extremely painful as it treads a familiar path of loss, hurt and rejection which we were likely trying so hard to avoid when we grabbed hold of the hot love in the first place.

We can do our work alone, in a couple, in a family, with friends, in a community. Whatever our life is like these things will come up and we can choose to face them or to run away. Is a hot love relationship the best place to do our work? It may well bring everything up very intensely and starkly, but we can also get so caught in the dynamics that it's extremely hard to see clearly. Also in focusing on a couple relationship, we can become separated from the kind of support systems that we need to do the work.

So again I'd be very cautious. Hot love can be the basis for a later, warm, relationship if it is flexible over time. But I'm not convinced that it has any more going for it than forging and nurturing multiple connections and building intentional relationships based on shared values, ways of living, etc. In hot love we're often building a relationship on the foundations of that intense emotional experience, without taking our time to get really informed about the other person, the dynamic between us, and what we each want before building anything together. It's kind of like forming a relationship while we're high and hoping it'll still be good when we sober up.

Hot love has a high risk of falling purely into having mode. This is not to say that other kinds of relationships escape from having mode, or the kinds of unconscious processes and unhelpful habits that I've covered here, of course. But they can be less intense, more spacious, and more supportive of us doing this work if we share these kinds of understandings.

And that's my hot take on hot love!

Relationship FAQ

March 2014

The Guardian interviewed a bunch of sex and relationship bloggers to find out our answers to our most frequently asked questions. The article is here and you can read my answers below – hard to capture all the complexity in 130 words a piece!

Question 1: What kinds of relationship are most successful?

I write a lot about different possible ways of doing relationships: monogamous, monogamish and openly non-monogamous relationships; living apart together and long distance relationships; sexual and non-sexual relationships. Something I'm often asked is whether a certain form of relationships can be successful. My question back is always 'what do you mean by successful?' It generally turns out that people mean longevity. While studies have found that all these forms of relationships can last over time, I question whether that is the best measure of relationship 'success'. Perhaps that is something else that is worth thinking about.

Question 2: Will things get easier if I change how I do relationships?

When people contemplate a different kind of relationship – such as an open relationship or polyamory – they often imagine that it will solve all of the problems they're currently having. I've called this the 'poly grail' (although it happens with all kinds of relationships). Sadly the answer is that any different way of doing relationships has its own challenges. It's tough to be monogamous, it's tough to be single, and it's tough to be non-monogamous (whether you do that openly, or secretly in the form of affairs). It's well worth finding a kind of relationship that works for you, but it's far too much pressure to expect to find the 'one true way' of doing relationships, just as it's too much pressure to expect to find 'the one' partner who'll fulfil all your needs.

Question 3: How do I go about finding the kind of relationship that works for me?

Instead of searching for the perfect relationship, it's helpful to figure out what's important to us, and to communicate about that. For example, where do you stand between wanting just one very close person in your life and wanting lots of friends or partners who are equally close? What about between sexual exclusivity and having many sexual encounters (online or offline)? Is it important to have a clear agreed contract for how you do relationships or for everyone to be free to make their own decisions? Do you like to be private or are you keen to share everything with partners? Communication won't resolve all the differences we have in relationships, but it definitely helps to be open about such things from the start and to accept that people can feel

very differently about them.

Love myths

September 2014

How do we, in general, conceive relationships today? How strong are the 'love myths'?

Love myths do still seem to be strong. A range of relationship styles are practised across the world (many cultures being polygamous or having relationships based on things other than romantic love). Despite this, the western ideal tends to be finding 'The One' perfect partner and remaining with them for life with the expectation that the relationship will generally provide happiness and fulfil all of each persons' needs. We know that this model is common because very few other models are ever considered in mainstream media (magazines, movies, TV programmes, etc.) and psychologists like Bjarne M. Holmes have found that many people try to follow those love myths. Interestingly he has also found that believing strongly in such myths often means people having worse, rather than better, relationships.

Psychologist Terri Conley and her colleagues have found that people generally think that a life-long monogamous relationships is beneficial for a couple's sex life, happiness and well-being, and for any children they have. However, there is evidence which challenges all of these beliefs and suggests that forms of consensual non-monogamy (such as polyamory and open relationships) can be just as beneficial. It seems from such research that around 4-5% of people in the US engage in some form of consensual non-monogamy.

What do we actually know about the reality of relationships today?

The statistics suggest that up to 50 or 60% of monogamous people have at least one affair or infidelity. However, it is notoriously difficult to get exact numbers on this because people are often reluctant to open up about it even on an anonymous questionnaire. This tells us that even within supposedly monogamous relationships, non-consensual non-monogamy is actually norm.

Also, we know that people often think that they share understandings of what monogamy means in their relationships, but that frequently they eventually find out that they differ (and that can often cause a crisis). For example, it is very common for one person to think that looking at pornography or having cybersex, is okay, whilst the other person disagrees, or for there to be disagreements around remaining friends with ex partners.

When did this idea of marriage as an institution, based on love only, start to exist and why?

Indeed the western love ideals are very new. Historian Stephanie Coontz suggests that they date back only to around the 1950s and the invention of the nuclear family. Before this, marriages were frequently entered into for factors to do with family, money, work, childcare, etc. rather than for romantic love (although that doesn't mean that romantic love was never involved).

Also our idea of what you should get from a romantic partner has altered over time such that there is a lot more pressure on partners to be 'everything' to each other as communities and religion have dwindled, and worklives have become more precarious. Partners are often expected to provide belonging, excitement, validation, security, and to help us meet our goals in life.

Paradoxically, this pressure makes it less, rather than more, likely that people will stay together, as it is often impossible for people to match up to the huge, and often contradictory, expectations upon them. For example, Esther Perel writes about how difficult it is for relationships to provide warmth and stability at the same time as passion and excitement.

What are the most contradictory rules of love, as you see it?

I think that so many of them are contradictory. For example the pressure to be highly monogamous and to get all our needs met by one person often makes it more likely that people will be tempted elsewhere. The pressure to be happy at all times with each other makes it more likely that people will conflict. The pressure to have 'great sex' makes it less likely that we will relax and enjoy sex with a partner. The pressure to stay together forever makes it more likely that we will break up!

The answer, as I see it, is to open up these rules of love to exploration and to really think about which are useful to us, which we don't need, and which might even be damaging.

Romance

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020:
megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/what-is-romance

What do we know about the relationship between sex/eroticism and love/romanticism?

Sex

1. Not everyone experiences sexual attraction - there are plenty of asexual (ace) people.
2. From ace people we learn that romantic love and sex don't have to go together. Plenty of people - asexual and otherwise - have romantic love without having to express it sexually.
3. Sex is generally very narrowly defined, and the idea that that's the only 'proper' way of doing sex, and that everyone should do it that way, is bad for everybody.
4. Expanding out what we mean by sex is an excellent idea.
5. That expansion needs to include solo sex as an equally legit form as sex with other people

Romance

1. Not everyone experiences romantic attraction - there are plenty of aromantic (aro) people
2. From aro people we learn that romantic love and sex don't have to go together. Plenty of people - aromantic and otherwise - have sex outside the context of romantic relationships.
3. Romance is generally very narrowly defined, and the idea that that's the only 'proper' way of doing love/relationships, and that everyone should do it that way, is bad for everybody.
4. Expanding out what we mean by romance is an excellent idea.
5. That expansion needs to include solo romance as an equally legit form as romance with other people

So let's unpack romance…

1. Not everyone experiences sexual attraction - there are plenty of aromantic (aro) people

Like ace people, aro people often face non-consensual and coercive behaviour from others. In the same way as ace people are often disbelieved, told they haven't found the right person yet, and have attempts made to get them to have sex, aro people face similar issues. Of course some people are both aro and ace and face double discrimination on this. For those who are aro and sexual, they often find that people they are sexual with try to coerce or persuade them into romantic relationships due to the common belief that having sex with somebody means you are in a 'relationship' (which is generally equated with a long-term, sexual, romantic, partnership), and on the relationship escalator.

2. From aro people we learn that romantic love and sex don't have to go together. Plenty of people - aromantic and otherwise - have sex outside the context of romantic relationships

Just as consent is vital in sexual encounters it's also vital around romantic relationships. It's not okay to assume that because sex has happened this means that a certain kind of relationship will unfold, or in a particular way. It's a great idea for relationship assumptions to be part of any consent conversation.

There are many contexts in which people often have sex without romance, including hookups, friends-with-benefits, fuckbuddies, casual sex, sex work, and sex within romantic relationships where people are just not feeling romantic at that time. In fact many people find that trying to have sex in a specifically 'romantic' way doesn't work for them, while others do like to bring the two together.

3. Romance is generally very narrowly defined, and the idea that that's the only 'proper' way of doing love/relationships, and that everyone should do it that way, is bad for everybody

What do we even mean by romance? Are we talking about the cultural script which includes romantic meals, weekends away, romantic gestures (such as flowers) and words (such as 'I love you)? If so this can be very limiting. We've talked elsewhere about the limits of romcom versions of romance and the damaging hierarchy that puts romantic love above all other kinds of love.

Gary Chapman's idea of Love Languages says that we all prefer to give and receive love in different ways - in all kinds of relationships that we may have, not just 'romantic' ones. Many people will not enjoy some of the conventional ways of expressing romantic love. For example PDAs (public displays of affection like holding hands) can be deeply uncomfortable to some people, and dangerous for some. Loving words and terms of endearment can land with people very differently depending on how they were deployed in their family. Gift-giving and surprises can feel delightful to some, and an onerous obligation to others. As Billy Bragg wrote 'No amount of poetry can mend this broken heart, but you can put the hoover round if you want to make a start'.

4. Expanding out what we mean by romance is an excellent idea

Perhaps rather than restricting romance to 'romantic relationships' and deciding whether or not we're into them, it could be useful to expand out what we mean by romance so that it can become something that's possible to have - or not have - in all forms of relationships. The term 'bromance', for example, refers to close bonds and intimate behaviour between guys and could be seen as a valuable step on the way to a kinder form of masculinity where guys do emotional labour with each others rather than relying on people of other genders to do it (and, let's face it, this is pretty desperately needed right about now).

What might it look like to practise consensual romantic behaviours with our friends, colleagues, family-members, companion animals, and beyond?

5. That expansion needs to include solo romance as an equally legit form as romance with other people

This leads us to our relationship with ourselves. Solo polyamorous (and solo monogamous) people regard themselves as their primary partner. Perhaps we can all learn something from solo folk about the importance of treating ourselves as an important relationship in our lives. What might it look like to be romantic with ourselves? Perhaps giving ourselves a date night once a week which we make special, or going for a weekend away with ourselves, or getting ourselves little gifts.

Four things I've learnt about relationships

July 2018, for Poly Dallas Millenium

This year I was invited to speak at the Poly Dallas conference. The organiser, Ruby Boie Johnson, generously decided to subtitle the conference after my relationship self-help book Rewriting the Rules – also out in it's second edition this year. Here is a written version of the talk I gave – about what I've learnt about relationships since I first wrote that book.

Why this means the world to me

Hi. Thank-you so much for having me here today. When Ruby approached me last year saying she would like to subtitle the conference this time after my book Rewriting the Rules I was blown away.

Partly this was because that book has been such a labour of love for me. It was the first self-help style book I wrote and I spent a decade longing to write it but unable to believe in myself enough to do so. When I finally did manage to battle through my inner critic I had to distill years of painfully finding my own way with relationships onto the page. The second edition – which just came out – was no less difficult. It felt like I was co-authoring it with an older version of myself and that was not an easy collaboration by any means.

Also it is a huge deal – as a European writer – to be welcomed to a US conference. A bunch of us have been studying and writing about polyamory in Europe for some decades now, but it often feels like the – often more recent – work coming out of US academia and activism eclipses what we've done, and are still doing. Of course this is even more the case for Europeans who sometimes or always write in languages other than English.

This is particularly challenging for me now that I'm working towards making my living as a writer. It's extraordinarily hard to make any money from that line of work, and it can feel tough knowing that I am – I think – saying something new and important, but that few folk on this side of the pond will know about it. This recognition – and potential to speak to an American audience – means the world to me.

So it was already a huge deal to be invited to speak at this conference. And then I checked out the event online. It quickly became clear that here, finally, was an intersectional non-monogamy conference. For years I've been frustrated by the lack of coverage of power dynamics and social

structures, privilege and oppression, in polyamory communities, and now I was being invited to an event where these were foregrounded.

It also felt intensely vulnerable. The main reason by far that I wanted to write a second edition of Rewriting the Rules was because when I wrote the first edition back in 2010 I had barely engaged with intersectional feminism. This has been something I've done my absolute best to address since then to the point that the vast majority of the thinkers I now engage with come from this approach, but I realise I still have a hell of a lot to catch up on. As a white British author to be invited to speak at a conference alongside the likes of Kevin Patterson, Dalychia Saah, J Mase and Feminista Jones is a huge honour and one I really hope I can do justice to.

This is why I haven't taken the easy road with this presentation. I could've given you my standard hot take on non-monogamy talk that I've been giving the last couple of years, but you deserve more than that. So I'm going to heed the words of one of my heroes – Mollena Williams-Haas – from the incredible talk she gave at the Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies conference in Vienna last year (available here if you haven't seen it – please do check it out). She said that the gift we need to give to the world is to go into the places we are most vulnerable and to work – whatever our work is – from that place.

I've been holding those words close ever since then. It is why I'm finally dropping my academic and therapy work to focus on writing. It is why my writing now includes memoir and erotic fiction as well as self-help: so that I can be transparent about where these ideas come from and why they mean so much to me. I guess it's about showing my workings instead of just the polished advice that comes out of all that painful experience.

Because if I hide that part of it away I can be just another shitty self-help author holding themselves as a point of comparison to the rest of the world as somebody who has it all together and is going to lecture you on how to get it right just like them. This is one of the things I hate most about self-help and I'm committed to doing something different. A major theme through all my work is that relationships are extremely fucking hard and we all struggle in our relationships with ourselves, with our loved ones, and with the world. I've heard it said that your mess is your message. Perhaps the message is stronger if you also share the mess.

So I'm going to give you a short introduction to the key ideas of Rewriting the Rules, and then spend the rest of the talk telling you about what I've learnt about relationships since the first edition: by going into the mess.

Rewriting the Rules

Most relationship self-help books make a lot of assumptions about what a 'successful' relationship looks like, and how you go about having one. They sell the reader the dream of happy-ever-after, and put the blame on them if they can't achieve it. That's why I called

Rewriting the Rules an anti-self-help book. Instead of locating blame in the individual it starts with the shitty cultural messages we all receive about relationships, suggesting that they are primarily responsible for the difficulties we come across. Messages like the idea that you have to find The One perfect person who will complete you, that you must hide any relationship conflicts from the rest of the world and pretend like everything is awesome all of the time, that you should have hot sex with this person for the rest of time, and that that must be in a monogamous relationship.

For each theme in the book – love, sex, gender, conflict, etc. – I asked four questions:

- What are the rules that we learn about this aspect of relationships?
- Why might we question them?
- If they don't work for us, what might we put in their place? and
- What if we went beyond rules to embrace the uncertainty of this thing?

So, for example, in the monogamy chapter I look at the rules that suggest monogamy is the one true way of doing relationships, and how we can question that by looking at the statistics on non-monogamy globally, and on secret non-monogamy in countries like the UK and US. I explore the pressures that the monogamy ideal puts on relationships, and the diversity of monogamish and non-monogamous relationship styles that now offer alternatives to this. However, I also explore the tendency we have – when stepping away from mainstream cultural rules – to put new rules in their place and hold onto them just as rigidly. I suspect we're all very familiar with varieties of poly-normativity and polier-than-thou tendencies to put forward the one true way of polyamory – or the poly grail, as I call it. Unicorn hunting, treating 'secondaries' as lesser human beings, and becoming so poly-saturated that you have no time for friends or self-care are three examples that spring to mind (not that me or anyone else in this room would ever do anything like that I'm sure!)

In Rewriting the Rules I try to steer clear of suggesting that any way of doing relationships is inherently better, more normal, or morally superior. It's more about appreciating that different things work for different people, and in different relationships. We need to start by unpacking all the cultural rules that impact us all – whether we're inside them or outside of them.

What I've learn about relationships since Rewriting the Rules

So that's where I got to in the first edition of Rewriting the Rules, and I am still proud of that book because that cultural piece is missing from so much self-help around relationships – even polyamorous relationships.

However it could be argued that I went too far the other way. Focusing on wider cultural messages is also a good way of avoiding looking too carefully at closer-to-home reasons for your own relationship struggles.

Also, while I wrote a lot about the need to look at wider culture to inform our close relationships, I didn't make enough connections in the other direction. How can going into the mess and vulnerability of our relationships help us make a better contribution to wider society? In the last five years this seems to me the most urgent question as we all try to make sense of a world of Trump and Brexit, to deal with the vital questions raised by – for example – #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and the current moral panic around trans.

Here are four key ideas that I've woven into the new edition of Rewriting the Rules which I want to share. Obviously there's only time to touch on them here – what they are and the implications they have for our relationships with our close people and the wider world. Hopefully they might be a jumping off point for more conversations and reflections though. There are free zines on my website covering most of these themes in a lot more detail if you find them useful.

1. **Relationship patterns and intergenerational trauma**

The first thing I wanted to include way more of in the second edition was relationship patterns: how they get formed, how they impact us and the people around us, and how we might be able to shift them. That involved taking a long, hard look at my own relationship patterns which have been something like the TV Show *The Littlest Hobo*. Did you see this show? It was one of my favs growing up. Every week this dog finds a new person and home, he helps them with whatever they're struggling with, but once things are sorted he can't stay and he has to head off down the road again. He's basically a manic-pixie dream dog.

This was what I was doing in relationships of all kinds my whole life. I tried to figure out what people wanted me to be, and then I gave it to them. Initially that resulted in huge validation – I was good, and I was good for people. Once I was polyamorous I could be good for many people. What a good Littlest Hobo! But it's unsustainable. And it hurt people and it hurt me, a lot. I've lost so many homes, people, companion animals. Too much loss. While I definitely don't think the only relationships of value are the ones that last, I wouldn't mind the chance at a relationship, home, family, or community that lasted longer than five years.

The cultural piece was part of this of course. The promise of being – and getting – The One definitely had a role to play in my struggles, as did the Hollywood promise that true love is the path to lasting happiness – whether in its monogamous or polyamorous form.

But – as with all of us I suspect – my history was also a big part of the picture. Perhaps the major piece of work I've been doing the last couple of years has been on this. Interestingly #MeToo was a huge part of it. My sisters and I started by sharing our experiences of sexual assault – growing up and in more recent years, including in polyamory communities. This opening up led us to sharing stories of our upbringing and identifying the impact of intergenerational trauma and how it had left all of us feeling that we were unacceptable unless we covered over our emotions and pretended to be something we were not. We now talk on

Google hangouts between San Francisco, LA, and London every few weeks, committed to building a different way of relating, at least between the three of us.

2. Self and other consent

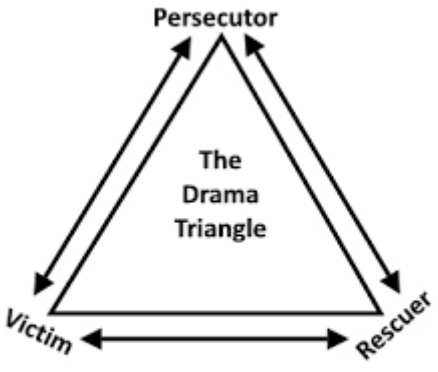
How can I challenge this pattern – which I suspect many others share – of trying to be what others want me to be? Self-consent is the key here. One of the main books that I drew on in the second edition of Rewriting the Rules was bell hooks's All About Love.

My main takeaway from this was that love can't happen – isn't even love – unless we value ourselves and each other equally. That's where you get to if you apply the same thought processes to social justice and to interpersonal relationships.

Learning self-consent is every bit as hard as learning how to – really – treat others consensually in a world of massive power imbalances and insidious social scripts, as Zach Budd highlighted at the Poly Dallas conference. It's still a work in progress for me: a lifelong process I suspect. But it includes noticing when I let desire for approval, fear of failure, or a deep-down belief of my unacceptability override what I really feel. It requires cultivating kindness and practising self-care: not the neoliberal capitalist bubble-bath kind of self-care but the Audre Lorde long-hard-look-at-yourself self-care that we all need to make a daily practice if we want to stop harming ourselves and others on an interpersonal – and a global – level.

3. The drama triangle

The other idea I brought into the new edition was Stephen Karpman's drama triangle. If you're not familiar with it it looks like this.



From Transactional Analysis
by Steve Karpman

The idea is that, in relationships, we often get drawn into stuck dynamics where we go round and round this triangle. For example my Littlest Hobo dynamic easily puts me in the role of

rescuer – coming in and making somebody's life all better so that maybe – in the immortal words of Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman – they will 'rescue me right back'. The problem is if you get invested in the role of rescuer you easily put the other person in a double-bind. They must get better so that you can feel you've been a good rescuer. Also they mustn't get better because then you'll be out of a job. It's easy then to shift from rescuer to persecutor because you're actually treating somebody pretty badly. And easy to shift again into victim because rescuers really don't like people pointing out that they're actually being persecutors.

Sound familiar? I think that this triangle has so much to offer what we're grappling with in our wider communities. When #MeToo 2.0 hit some of the polyamory communities in the UK it took a familiar form. One individual abuser was highlighted, survivors shared their stories of his behaviour, and others aligned themselves with two different forms of rescuing: either becoming saviours for the 'victims', or bystander-apologists for the persecutor.

If we're going to get to grips with the abusive dynamics that inevitably show up in our relationships and communities – in a culture founded on oppression and unequal valuing of different bodies and lives – then I think we have to stay with our capacity to occupy all three positions on this triangle. We need to get to know our inner victim, our inner persecutor, and our inner rescuer. That involves a whole heap of self-kindness, as well as the intensely vulnerable self-care work of staying with feelings.

4. **Staying with all the feels in all the relationships**

Learning our part in drama triangles – interpersonal and social – involves staying with how it feels to be in all of those places. For example, the work that my sisters and I are doing involves going back into our intensely vulnerable victim/survivor places: recognising that the various kinds of experiences we went through at young ages was not okay, and that the strategies that we developed to survive them made all kind of sense. It also involves recognising how much of that intergenerational trauma came out of us being on the receiving end of other people's survival strategies, and how our own survival strategies have also now hurt other people.
Staying with our persecutor potential is hard as hell of course. It involves being with the guilt and shame and fear of our potential to harm others and to harm again. It involves going beyond the temptation to focus on obvious forms of abuse and non-consent – that we may not have engaged in – to the micro level emotional gaslighting, manipulation, and non-consensual pressure that we all take part in our day-to-day relationships, and the macro level dynamics of oppression that we all benefit from and are implicated in whether we like it or not.

Staying with our rescuer involves recognising our tendency to focus on obvious abusers and villains to avoid looking at the damage we do – for example by setting ourselves up as saviours, by not addressing our privilege and power, or by failing to acknowledge our limits and taking on too much only to let people down.

It's hard fucking work, but we have to do it. And it involves developing our capacity to stay with all of the feelings in all of our relationships. So many of our survival strategies, relationship patterns, and non-consensual tendencies comes from endeavouring to avoid feeling the feelings that scare us: shame, anger, fear, sadness, loss. And of course, like a hamster on a wheel, most of these tendencies will fetch us right back where we most wanted to avoid. As Anita Cassidy puts it: 'Feeling shit doesn't kill you, but the shit you do to stop feeling shit might.'

An important caveat to this is, of course, with all these things (being present, staying with feelings, being vulnerable) they have to be done in a container of huge self-kindness, self-compassion, and self-care. Those things always have to come first and foremost. It's easy to do these things because you think you should, and for them to end up being far too much. So taking it slowly, prioritising kindness over all else, and getting support with it, are all vital.

I think we all have to do this work, and I think that doing this work will look different for all of us. For me it has included a combination of journaling about the hard stuff, sitting with my feelings by the Thames, reading people who challenge me on social media, deliberately practising showing close people my vulnerability bit-by-painful-bit, and – perhaps unexpectedly – tuning into my erotic fantasies and writing erotic fiction.

Right now it involves the painful messy work of acknowledging my relationship patterns with existing – and new – partners, and how far I may – or may not – be able to shift them given how strongly entrenched and sneaky they are. I'm convinced though that this can be a joyful process as much as it is an excruciating one – often both of those things simultaneously. And if it's going to make any difference it's one we have to do together in our relationships, in our families, and in our communities.

Neoliberalism, sex and relationships

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020: megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/neoliberalism-and-sex-and-relationships

What is neoliberalism?

Although there is no definition of neoliberalism that everyone agrees on, broadly it's the name for the capitalist economic and political system from the 1950s onwards where there is a shift in power from the state to business. With the common sense idea that states should be run like businesses and that if we trust in the free market determining and where there is trust that what the market determines will be best for everyone. The power resides in capital rather than in workers themselves. Everything is judged on whether the graph of capital is going up, rather than down. For example, countries are judged on their GDP rather than on the wellbeing of citizens.

Injustice is built into this system because it can only work by paying people less and less for the products they produce, in order that others can consume them (for example factory workers in poor countries on very low wages producing our clothes and technology). The system values some bodies, labour, and lives way less than others. It is also inherently non-consensual because it relies upon people continuing to produce and consume more and more, whether they want to or not, beyond the limits of what is good for mental or physical health. This system also ensures that we consume more and more, which requires the kinds of ecosystem invasion and environmental treatment that results in climate change, pandemic and related social and economic crises.

However there is a veneer of individualism over this injustice which gaslights everyone into believing that they live in a meritocracy where if they work hard as an individual they will be rewarded for it, and any failure is down to personal failings. People are also placed in competition against each other and told that resources are scarce, meaning they are unlikely to work collectively or unionise. This monitoring culture where people police themselves - and other individuals - through shame and blame also means a focus on individual change rather than recognising the systemic and structural change which would be needed to improve our relationships with work, ourselves, and each other.

The non-consensual, competitive, and shaming/blaming nature of this system is inherently traumatising, but individuals are held responsible for any mental health - or other - struggles they experience as a result of this. Both possible responses to this - of continuing to overfunction, or of giving up and underfunctioning - are painful and maintain the status quo.

How does this impact sex and relationships?

On a practical level, sex and relationships are impacted because we're caught up in a way of being which leaves nowhere near the time and energy we would need in order to have good sex and relationships: We see ourselves as what we do, we have to work longer hours, we often have long commutes, rent and house prices are high, and we're placed on various escalators where the graph has to go up in order for us to feel okay about ourselves (the housing ladder, the relationship escalator, career progression, promotion, etc.)

Neoliberalism also creates ideals of 'normal' in relation to sex, relationships, and everything else which people are meant to aspire to, but which actually fit very few people, in order to create a sense of lack and scarcity and fuel consumption. Many industries then profit on people trying desperately to fit 'normal', and people don't question it maintaining this system.

People exist in atomised units (individuals, couples, nuclear families) which are kept private, so the struggles that everyone is experiencing to function and be happy in such units - and certainly to meet the aspiration goals around sex and relationships - is hidden, and many suffer without support.

We're expected to be sex and relationship entrepreneurs, working hard at sex and relationships - on top of everything else - and fooling ourselves that this is pleasurable and fun.

The solutions - in terms of our internal and external systems - involve slowing down rather than speeding up, being process-focused and present rather than goal focused and keeping the graph going up at all times, being with our feelings rather than overriding them or avoiding them, and treating ourselves and others consensually rather than valuing some things more than others.

The inevitability of treating partners as things?

Romance in Ruby Sparks (and why I like the ending)

Summer 2013

Recently I got round to watching last year's Ruby Sparks. I'd been looking forward to watching this film for some time because it is a mediation on what would happen if we could create our perfect partner. The film was everything I'd hoped for. However, when I gushed about it on facebook, several people said they had felt let down by the ending. Here I want to present my take on the film, and to explain why I think the ending needed to be the way it was.

Ruby Sparks

In the film an isolated writer (Calvin Weir-Fields) has writer's block having published one highly successful book when he was pretty young. His therapist encourages him to write a brief account of a positive encounter with another person. He invents a scenario where he meets his perfect girlfriend in the park. Soon he is writing more and more about her because he enjoys imagining her so much. He describes her to his therapist:

> Calvin: Ruby Sparks. Twenty-six years old. Raised in Dayton, Ohio.
>
> Dr. Rosenthal: Why Dayton?
>
> Calvin: Sounds romantic. Ruby's first crushes were Humphrey Bogart and John Lennon. She cried the day she found out they were already dead. Ruby got kicked out of high school for sleeping with her art teacher… or maybe her Spanish teacher. I haven't decided yet. Ruby can't drive. She doesn't own a computer. She hates her middle name, which is Tiffany. She always, always roots for the underdog. She's complicated. That's what I like best about her. Ruby's not so good at life sometimes. She forgets to open bills or cash checks and… Her last boyfriend was 49. The one before that was an alcoholic. She can feel a change coming. She's looking for it.
>
> Dr. Rosenthal: Looking for what?
>
> Calvin: Something new.

Spoiler alert: Don't read on if you want to watch the movie without knowing what happens.

During the time that he is writing about Ruby, Calvin starts to find bits of women's clothing around his house and things in his bathroom cabinet that don't belong to him. Then one day he returns home to find that Ruby exists and is living with him. She believes that everything from their first encounter to her moving in with him has actually happened.

After initial confusion Calvin is delighted and throws himself into a real relationship with Ruby. The two enjoy a perfect honeymoon period captured in a movie montage of dancing, beaches and running around town. But things start to sour when Calvin introduces Ruby to his family who she loves whilst he finds them problematic. He begins to become grumpy with the very things that he created Ruby to be.

Calvin's brother, Harry, has suggested that Calvin should continue writing about Ruby in order to make her into whatever he wants. However, even when she is getting on his nerves Calvin refuses to do this. Then Ruby begins to pull away for some independence: wanting to start a job, hanging out with her friends, and deciding to spend one night a week back at her own flat to give them some space. Calvin panics and returns to his typewriter. He writes that Ruby was sad whenever she wasn't with Calvin. Ruby then becomes needy and tearful, unable to be parted from Calvin for a moment. Calvin writes that Ruby was effervescently happy all of the time, in order to try to keep her with him but not so demanding. This also backfires because constant happiness is hard to take, and because it is clear that Ruby isn't choosing to be with Calvin at this point, so he writes her back to normal.

The couple return to bickering and fighting when Ruby doesn't do what Calvin wants her to do. There is also the sense that the constant changes have taken a toll on Ruby emotionally. At a party she is left alone and flirts with Calvin's agent. At this point Calvin explodes and tells her what she is, forcing her to do things by typing them out as she stands in front of him. Finally he stops and she runs to her room. He is struck by the horror of what he has become and leaves all of the pages that he has ever written about Ruby outside her room with a final line saying that Ruby is no longer bound by the past and that as she leaves the house she is set free.

The following morning Ruby has disappeared and Calvin is left alone to mourn. Eventually he pulls himself together and buys a computer instead of a typewriter. This was a relief to me because the main problem that I had with the film was understanding how somebody could write a perfect first draft into a typewriter! Calvin writes the story of his time with Ruby, anonymised, and it is a great success.

At the end of the film – which my facebook friends found so problematic – Calvin bumps into Ruby in the park. She is reading his new book but clearly she has forgotten everything that happened due to being set free. They have some banter similar to the first time that they met

and it seems that Calvin has been given a second chance at the relationship, but this time having learnt his lessons in love.

There are probably many different readings of this film, and perhaps the way in which you read it affects how you view the ending. Two readings particularly struck me: we could understand the film as an exploration of gender in relationships (and wider society), and/or we could understand it as an examination of how people relate to each other more broadly. We don't have to discard one reading in order to accept the other as both are possible through the same situations, and indeed the way we relate to each other is generally infused with gender. However, the latter reading perhaps invites a more sympathetic understanding of Calvin: and one in which we might be more likely to wish him the redemption he receives in the final scene.

Deconstructing the manic pixie dream girl

Under a gendered reading we could see Ruby Sparks as an explicit deconstruction of the manic pixie dream girl trope in fiction. In this common romantic plot, a man's rather empty emotionless life is given meaning when he meets a wacky, quirky woman whose wild and childlike ways help him to learn to love and to free himself from his self-imposed constraints.

Clearly this trope was on the authors' minds when they were writing the film. When Calvin first describes the woman that he is writing about to his brother, Harry, Harry replies: 'quirky, messy women whose problems only make them endearing are not real.'

Not only does the film expose the lack of realism in the manic pixie dream girl trope, it also directly challenges the various specifically problematic aspects of this trope, particularly the way in which it infantilises women and the approach it takes to mental health.

When Calvin tries to justify Ruby to his brother saying 'she's a person', Harry responds 'you haven't written a person, okay? You've written a girl'. There are echoes here of Beauvoir's theories that men are regarded as human beings whilst women are seen as being something other than that, and that part of this othering involves infantalising women such that femininity is bound up with being childlike and non-threatening. Interestingly this all relates to freedom. Men are expected to embrace their freedom – and the responsibilities which go with it – in life, whilst women are dissuaded from doing this and encouraged rather to be 'for-others', making themselves into the dutiful daughter or the perfect partner, for example, and remaining in a childlike state where they do not embrace their freedom. It is interesting that Ruby explicitly links the freedom and infantilisation towards the end of the film when she responds to Calvin's attempts to control her saying 'I'm not your child!' Calvin's assumptions in this matter are clear given that he isn't even willing for Ruby to have a job in a coffee shop or to go out with friends because these things would be for her rather than for him. There is also something particularly sinister in Harry's argument that Calvin should keep writing Ruby after she appears: 'for *men everywhere*, you've got to take advantage of this'.

The continued popularity of the manic pixie dream girl trope in indie movies of the last decade such as Garden State or Elizabethtown suggests that the ideal of the woman who is childlike and non-threatening and exists 'for-others' is alive and well, and Ruby Sparks does well to reveal it and to criticise it. Calvin's misogyny is clear in the way in which he describes his previous girlfriend as a 'heartless slut'. However bad her behaviour may have been, the term 'slut' is bound up with the sexual double standard, suggesting that women are a different species to be judged on different terms to men, and 'heartless' also suggests that women should properly be emotional and nurturing and that it is problematic for them to move away from such stereotypes.

The manic pixie dream girl trope also echoes wider societal representations of women as 'mad rather than bad'. Because women cannot be seen as having freedom or responsibility, if they behave in ways which are difficult or different this tends to be regarded as a sign of mental ill-health rather than as morally problematic or criminal. Statistics on the numbers of women and men diagnosed with mental illnesses, and convicted of crimes, support the suggestion that there is still a tendency to view women as mad and men as bad (although there are certainly shifts in this over time, and intersections with race, class and other factors have an influence).

In addition, the manic pixie dream girl has to walk a fine tightrope between being mad enough but not too mad, akin to the tightrope of the sexual double standard where she has to be sexual enough but not a slut. When Ruby becomes properly depressed, and then manic, after Calvin has written her those ways, it is clearly unacceptable and reason enough for him to make further attempts at radical changes. There is an interesting commentary here on women's mental health in (heterosexual) relationships. From The Yellow Wallpaper, through writing on body image, authors have argued that women's attempts to make themselves into something 'for-others' in general, and 'for-men' in particular, can take a huge toll on their well-being. Kitty Stryker has a great post about real life attraction to manic pixie dream girls and why this is problematic for those involved, particularly regarding mental health.

If we read Ruby Sparks as a criticism of the manic pixie dream girl trope in general, and the differential and hierarchical treatment of men and women in wider society in particular, then perhaps we can understand why my facebook friends found the ending so appalling. Why should a man who objectified a woman – trying to shape her into exactly what he wanted her to be, infantalising her, messing with her mental health, denying her freedom, and dictating her sexuality – be offered a second chance?

One way to answer this is to point to the impossibility of stepping outside of culture. I think Ruby Sparks challenges the viewer (of whatever gender) to ask themselves whether they have honestly ever treated a woman in this kind of way. If they can't answer that they haven't, then perhaps they need to ask the same sympathy for Calvin as they would want for themselves.

Going further than this, perhaps we can – in some ways – regard Calvin as all of us in all relationships, not just as a man with a woman in this particular relationship.

Treating each other as things

Something that Beauvoir and Sartre agreed upon is our tendency is to treat other people as objects for ourselves in relationships. Terry Pratchett nicely captures this when his character, Granny Weatherwax, says ‘sin, young man, is when you treat people as things, including yourself, that’s what sin is’. It may be sin, but it is a sin that we’re all guilty of pretty much every day of our lives. And it is perhaps particularly prevalent in romantic relationships when we are thrust into close proximity with another person on a regular basis, when we get to know them better than we do other people in our lives, and when we come to be particularly dependent on them for various aspects of our material and emotional well-being (such as our confidence being linked to their approval, or our ability to do things being linked to their income and/or responses to our behaviour).

In a way we could be impressed by quite how long Calvin waits until he starts to try to change Ruby. It is only when he really fears losing her that he returns to his typewriter. It is worth asking ourselves whether we wouldn’t be tempted to use such a mechanism if we had it available to us, and in what ways we do something similar but with less awareness of it. Women’s and men’s magazines and self-help style books are consistent in their attempts to help us to figure out and play the ‘opposite sex’ in order to get them to do what we want them to do, sexually or otherwise. The ‘beauty and the beast’ myth of a woman being able to change a man plays out in relationships all the time, when people attempt to trick, cajole or nag their partner into self-promotion, diets or better domestic habits. It is important to admit to ourselves the temptation to make little tweaks and alterations to a partner, at the same time as holding them back from changing in directions that we are not comfortable with, or feel threatened by. And even if we don’t actually do anything, do we still give a clear message to our partner that we are not really okay with who and how they are with a sigh, a gesture or a hurt expression?

Ruby Sparks nicely captures some of the problems with this way of behaving, beyond the – hopefully obvious – ethical implications. Calvin wants his free-living Calvin-loving manic pixie dream girl, but he doesn’t want her too free, or too manic, or too dependent on him. Altering one aspect of her which he doesn’t like often results in altering other parts of her that he really did like. And the realities of living with another person are that there will inevitably be times when you don’t mesh. It is therefore difficult when Ruby is either dependent or independent, sad or happy, passive or active.

For me one of the most horrific moments in Ruby Sparks is not when Calvin is explicitly re-writing Ruby, but a much more mundane moment. She is singing a lovey-dovey made up song, off-key, in the kitchen. He is lying on the couch. He looks up and snaps something like ‘I’m trying to read’. This attempt, by Calvin, to make Ruby into a thing for himself, is all the more disturbing perhaps because it is impossible for the viewer not to see a mirror of themselves in the scenario.

As Sartre and Weatherwax both point out, there is a temptation to make ourselves into things for others which is just as powerful (and just as much of a sin?) as the temptation to make others into things for ourselves. Perhaps one of the main things that Calvin wants from Ruby is for somebody to love him for the way he is. And perhaps his own dislike of the way he is was responsible for his previous isolation and for his seeking help through therapy.

Again this path is fraught with problems. If we can find (or, in Calvin's case, create) a partner who loves, respects and is fascinated by, us as we are then we will likely be in constant fear of losing this. Thus we try to mold ourselves into what we think they want us to be and/or the sides of ourselves that we were displaying early in the relationship when they fell for us. This is unsustainable so we end up failing and hating ourselves or resenting our partner for constraining our freedom in this way. Or perhaps, like the rewritten Ruby, our partner continues to see us as marvellous whatever we do and we eventually come to distrust them and to be frustrated with this because we know – ourselves – that it is not true and we are really an imperfect flawed human. As Calvin wearily puts it 'she wasn't happy. So I made her happy… and now she's like this all the time.

It is often harder to see how self-objectification hurts anyone other than ourselves, but it does. Insisting that another person sees us in a certain way is unkind, as is letting them feel responsible for our well-being, guilty for hurting us when we suffer, and therefore constrained in their own freedom.

Why we need a happy ending: Calvin is us

If I'm honest with myself it's quite probable that they gave Ruby Sparks a happy ending because they originally had a more bleak and realistic ending which didn't go down well with Hollywood focus groups. If I'm super honest with myself perhaps I'm just a sucker for a happy ending myself and all this attempt to justify it is part of my own desire to believe that there is something possible beyond the Sartrean view that 'hell is other people' because we are doomed to keep objectifying each others and ourselves.

Despite having a more nuanced view of relationships than Sartre – recognising the tangle of ways in which gender and other aspects are messed up with our overall human tendency to objectify – Beauvoir was also more optimistic than Sartre about relationships, influencing his own later work which also began to see a way out of objectification.

Beauvoir thought that mutual relationships were possible and that in these people would embrace each other's freedom, and their own, and support each other in their projects in life.

We could see the end of Ruby Sparks as a move towards this mode of relating. Calvin sees the horror of what he has done to Ruby and he sets her free. Her well-being now means more to him than continuing his relationship with her, which is perhaps the ultimate sign of embracing of

another person's freedom. He is willing to go through grief and pain in order to stop treating somebody in this way. He has seen the suffering that regarding another person as a thing causes.

I wish Calvin a happy ending with Ruby because I think that we are all Calvin. Whoever we are we will have treated other people – probably the other people who we love the most – in similar ways to the ways in which Calvin treats Ruby. And if we look closely we can also see the problems in the ways in which Calvin treats himself: thinking that he is not okay and needing somebody else to prove to him that he is. We've probably all done that too.

So saying that Calvin is undeserving of a happy ending is tantamount to saying that we are not either and, whilst this may indeed be true, it also seems rather harsh.

Like Beauvoir I believe that mutual relationships are possible. They are not something we can ever achieve 24/7. We are bound to slip into objectification all the time and need to avoid beating ourselves up for it because expecting constant perfection is another way of treating ourselves as things. But mutual relationships are something to aspire to: an ethics to commit to in our relations with others and with ourselves. We can admit to ourselves, and others, when we have fallen into objectification. We can increase our awareness of the impact of this, and the ways in which our various forms of self- and other- objectification are impacted by power imbalances of gender, race, class, age and so many other aspects. And we can keep committing to doing something different: recognising and valuing the freedom of ourselves – and others – equally, and aiming for relationships of mutual support.

Hell is other people?

2011

No Exit

In *No Exit,* three characters (Garcin, Inez and Estelle) are, one-by-one, escorted into a drawing room and left there together, locked in. We soon discover that all have recently died and that this room is the hell to which they have been condemned for eternity. The characters initially respond in surprise that the room is nothing like the fiery pit of torture and torment which they had always imagined hell to be. However, Inez quickly realises that the idea must be that 'each of us will act as torturer of the other two'. Whilst Estelle and Garcin try to deny that they would torment the others, and even the validity of them being in hell (perhaps it is all a mistake), Inez is more aware of their fate and resigned to her rightful damnation.

Over the course of the play, we discover that all three characters have done things that they regard as bad and/or cowardly: Inez had an affair with her cousin's partner and he ended up killing himself, which led to his partner killing both herself and Inez, and she admits that she needs to make others suffer. Estelle became pregnant as a result of an affair and killed her daughter despite her lover begging her not to. Garcin tried to run away rather than being sent to jail as a conscientious objector, and beat and cheated on his wife. They succeed in becoming each others' tormentors mostly by denying each other what they seek which they believed would alleviate their suffering: Estelle wants Garcin to want and desire her and Garcin wants somebody to see him as a hero and not a coward. Eventually Garcin realises that there will never be any escape from being looked upon by Inez and Estelle, and that they will never see him as he wants to be seen. This is when he delivers the famous line 'hell is – other people!'.

Reading *No Exit*

Some people have simply read *No Exit* at face value: that it is about the kind of hell that might await these particularly (bad) people. However Sartre meant it to be a much wider comment on the human condition: other people are always hell for each other. There is some debate between Garcin, Inez and Estelle over whether they have been chosen as the ideal tormentors for one another, or whether they were simply allocated at random. It seems likely that it was the latter: the point being that any human beings thrown together would inevitably end up being hell for each other in some way.

This idea relates to Sartre's wider philosophy: the notion that as soon as we are in the (real or even imagined) presence of another person, we begin to see ourselves through their eyes and this is the end of our freedom. In his early work Sartre only sees two ways that we can deal with this situation: either we can try to make ourselves something for the other person, or we can try to turn them into something for us. Thus in *No Exit* we see Estelle trying to turn herself into a

desirable object for Garcin, and Garcin trying to get Inez to rescue him from his fear that he is a coward. The Look of other people has this incredible power. If only Inez (the truth-sayer) could see Garcin as not cowardly then that would mean that he is not.

However, Sartre says that such strategies are doomed to failure. Our freedom will always bubble up and we will resent trying to be what others want us to be, or we will grow weary of another person who has turned themselves into an object for us, because they will no longer have the freedom that we were originally attracted to. It is also possible to bring this existential reading together with a more psychodynamic one in the form of the transactional analysis drama triangle whereby there is always a victim, a perpetrator and a rescuer, but these roles keep switching: We see such switches throughout *No Exit* as freedom ensures that no role remains static for long.

There are also strong echoes of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophies in *No Exit* (unsurprisingly given the close relationship between her and Sartre). There are reverberations of The Second Sex in Inez's berating of Estelle for thinking that being a desirable object for a man is something to base her life (and even afterlife) around. And it is rather interesting for those of us who have reflected on the gendered treatment of Sartre and de Beauvoir's work that Inez sees the truth of the situation from the start, whilst Garcin (who was oblivious) is the one who is given the show-stopping line (which just summarises what Inez has been saying all along).

Is hell other people?

This is the big question that the play raises. Are other people necessarily hell for each other? Is there another way? Garcin tries, in the play, to disengage from the others, thinking that if they all just sat there in silence it might be okay. But the futility of this demonstrates what existentialists know – that we are inevitably in-relation with others and can never truly escape their influence (even if we retreat or rebel we are doing it in relation to them).

But might there be another way of being-with-others? I'm reminded of the Jewish parable of the long spoons, where hell is a place with a magnificent feast but everyone has spoons so long that they are unable to feed themselves and they starve. Heaven is exactly the same, but people are using the spoons to feed each other. Might the heaven version of *No Exit* consist of the exact same three people in the exact same room, but they have found a way to feed each other?

This idea sounds something like the form of mutual, or reciprocal, relating that de Beauvoir proposes in her work (notably her Ethics of Ambiguity), which also echoes in Merleau-Ponty's theories of intersubjectivity, and which Sartre was perhaps moving towards in his later, more Marxist influenced, writings. De Beauvoir argues that it is in all of our interests to recognise the freedom of others, not only because this is the reality of the situation, but because we need others to be free in order to trust their validations of us and to aid us in our own projects.

It seems like it is necessary for Inez, Estelle and Garcin to recognise, themselves, that their cowardice or cruelty was there, but also that it was not *all* that they were, and was not fixed and unchangeable. But perhaps they do require the Look of others to affirm that plurality and flexibility in themselves (they cannot use the long spoons to feed themselves). Do we inevitably regard others as objects for ourselves, or can we aspire to seeing others – and therefore ourselves – as unique, complex, changing, human beings? In fleeting moments of connection or mutuality can we experience a flash of heaven?

Crushing and NRE

Unrequited love

May 2018

Meanings of unrequited love

Like pretty much everything in life unrequited love will mean different things to different people, and at different times in their lives. However it can certainly often function as a distraction from the difficult stuff of life, as well as being a projection of something of ourselves – or something that we long for – onto another person.

In this way unrequited love is quite similar to erotic or romantic fantasies more broadly. These frequently stem from the difficult times of our past, and reveal a lot about what we fear and long for. We often use them as a way to distract ourselves from the hard stuff of our lives. But, like unrequited love, they offer another possibility – we could tune into them and use them as an opportunity to learn more about ourselves: what we value, what we dread, and how we relate to others. There's more on how to do this in my zine about erotic fantasies with Justin Hancock.

Treating people as things

The risk with unrequited love is that we treat it as something that *ought* to be requited, and focus on pursuing the object of our affections instead of tuning in to what these strong feelings have to tell us about our selves. Unrequited love is rarely actually about the other person – frequently we simply don't know them well enough to really know that they are all of the things that we think they are. Also there is generally a large amount of objectification going on – we want them to be something for us, rather than loving them in their full humanity (more about the dangers of this approach in my book *Rewriting the Rules*). Putting people on pedestals is rarely kind – they often end up falling off and being hurt by the experience. Why would you do that to somebody you love?

There's also often something in unrequited love about hoping for a rescuer or saviour: 'The One' person who will come into our lives and make everything better: A manic pixie dream person. Again this isn't a cool thing to do to someone, and if somebody does requite that kind of love then it's worth being very careful because you may well find yourself in the drama triangle (playing out the roles of rescuer, victim, and persecutor – not a good recipe for happy relationships – again see *Rewriting the Rules* for more on this).

Tuning into ourselves

However hard it may be, I would encourage people feeling unrequited love to leave the other person alone and to tune into themselves – perhaps with the help of a professional and/or self-care practices. It may well be that this person represents important sides of yourself that you have disowned or repressed in your life. What the love feeling is telling you is that you need to embrace those parts of you in yourself, not in another person (see my zine – *Plural Selves*). If you can do this then you may well find that you feel a lot better in yourself, and that you're capable of better relationships because you'll be bringing your whole self to them in future.

It's a hard path for sure, but the way to go with this is to try to stay with these heady, intoxicating feelings and to tune into what they're telling us about the ways in which we're unhappy with our lives. Then – ideally – we can start the slow process of shifting and changing those things ourselves – with the support and help of friends, communities, and others – instead of wishing for somebody to land in our lives and do that work for us.

How to tell if you fancy someone

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020: megjohnandjustin.com

Let's unpack 'fancying'.

- Fancying is biopsychosocial and political
- Fancying can happen in different ways for different people and all of those are okay
- There are many different kinds of fancying and all of them are okay
- What we can learn from tuning into fancying feels rather than acting on them immediately

Fancying is biopsychosocial and political

Like all aspects of sex and relationships, fancying is biopsychosocial. People often assume that it's just 'natural' - fancying people is a biological feeling, we have to act on it, and we can't help who we fancy. Actually none of those things are the case.

Fancying is complexly biopsychosocial: our physiological responses (bio) are massively shaped by what our wider culture defines as attractive (social), and our personal experiences from childhood onwards (psycho). We can see this when we look at the vast diversity of body shapes and sizes, skin and hair tones and styles, and kinds of people, who have been deemed attractive around the world and at different times.

Who is seen as most fanciable in wider culture shifts over time, and we can also expand or contract what we fancy in people depending on how we relate to wider culture and to the people in our lives. This is not to say that people have complete control over their sexuality or the capacity to change it at will - clearly they don't - but engaging with more diverse media, erotica, porn etc. may well expand the range of what we find attractive (just as engaging with limited representations may narrow it).

This is where fancying is political, because the current beauty norm is for young, white, thin/toned, blemish-free, non-disabled, cisgender people who conform to masculine or feminine ideals. It's also often limited in the kinds of things that are deemed attractive about a person's mind - certain kinds of intelligence and capacity to connect in certain ways - which don't encompass the range of neurodiversity.

If we feel limited by what is seen as culturally 'fanciable' we could experiment by trying to notice different features of others - and ourselves - with curiosity and openness, rather than instantly comparing it against the supposed norm or ideal.

Fancying can happen in different ways for different people and all of those are okay

There are also norms and ideals about the way fancying should work. People generally assume that you should know quickly whether or not you fancy somebody, and mostly that that would be based on physical appearance. Actually for many people a person's character, intelligence, kindness, or values are as - or more - important. The fact that many people can fancy somebody online who we've never met - or even seen - demonstrates that fancying isn't necessarily about appearance at all.

Also the focus on physical appearance assumes that sight is the most important sense when it comes to fancying and it's important to remember that this is an ableist assumption, and that the other senses - as well as other aspects of a person - can be equally or more important.

Demisexual people are those who need an emotional connection with somebody before they can fancy them - or know whether they fancy them. Whether we're demisexual or not, this is a helpful idea because it reminds us that it's okay to not know whether we fancy someone, for fancying to be something that emerges slowly over time rather than happening suddenly, or for it to ebb and flow.

Fancying can also be about whether you have a certain kind of connection with somebody or not. Many of us are attracted more to a kind of dynamic than to a kind of person - so fancying will happen if we find that kind of power dynamic, or sense of being at-ease, or nurturing relationship, or stimulating banter, with that person, and not if we don't.

There are many different kinds of fancying and all of them are okay

Asexual and aromantic communities have been supremely helpful in demonstrating that there are loads of different kinds of fancying that people can do, which may or may not come together. For example these might include…

- Erotic attraction - wanting erotic or sexual contact with another person (of course that in itself can mean lots of different things)
- Romantic attraction - wanting a romantic relationship with another person (ditto)
- Crush - having romantic feelings towards another person
- Squish - having platonic feelings towards another person or desiring a platonic relationship with them
- Sensual attraction - wanting physical touch and/or closeness with another person
- Aesthetic attraction - attraction to - or appreciation of - another person's appearance
- Emotional connection - feeling a sense of kinship with - or emotional closeness to - another person
- Intellectual connection - feeling drawn to a person's intellect or the way they think
- Values connection - feeling a sense of shared values with another person
- Spiritual connection - feeling a sacred connection, or sense of a similar spirituality

It can be useful to reflect on what kinds of attraction come into our fancying - in general, or with a specific person, and communicating that clearly if we do end up being open about our attraction.

What we can learn from tuning into fancying feels rather than acting on them immediately

In addition to fancying working in different ways for different people, it changing over time, and it having many different dimensions, it can also have lots of different meanings - which we may or may not be initially aware of.

The standard (capitalist) script for fancying is that it means you want somebody and it is successful if the fancying is reciprocated and you get what you want (i.e. that person). There can be a sense of obligation on the other person to fancy you back, and to enter a relationship with you - or have sex with you - if you fancy them. Needless to say none of this is a great way to treat yourself, or others, and it easily strays into non-consent. You're not entitled to anything from a person just because you fancy them, or even if they fancy you back.

If we don't want to fall into treating others - and ourselves - in this way we could practice staying with the feeling of fancying with curiosity rather than acting on it in any way. This can reveal all kinds of useful things that we might learn from about ourselves, for example:

- We can reflect on the politics of fancying and how this experience does - or doesn't - relate to what we've been told is attractive
- We can discover what different kinds of fancying are in play for us as we've discussed
- We might notice that fancying feelings are sometimes more about wanting to be like the person we fancy than about wanting to be with them, or possibly both. Are we drawn to things in that other people that we'd like to be more like ourselves? Might we find other ways of being more like that?
- We can connect with old feelings that are brought up by the fancying experience. Is it about certain longings or yearnings that we have because of lacking those things in our past (e.g. safety, validation, kindness, approval)? Again might we find other ways of meeting those longings, or staying with the feeling of longing?

It's easy - with fancying - to fall into idealising or objectifying somebody: fancying the idea of them or the person we imagine they might be for us. Needless to say this isn't a kind way to treat anybody. If we're doing this it's worth digging further into what's going on for us, rather than focusing on what we want from them.

New Relationship Energy (NRE)

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020: megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/new-relationship-energy-nre

NRE and crushes

NRE refers to the kinds of excited, fizzy, loved-up, kiddy, somewhat obsessed, feelings we can have at the start of a relationship: usually a romantic and/or erotic relationship. It's similar to the 'honeymoon period': the sense that the early days of a relationship might be particularly loving, romantic, passionate, and easy, compared to the rest. 'Falling in love' might capture something similar to NRE: the idea it is a crazy time of hot, rollercoaster emotions.

The difference between NRE and a crush is that crushes aren't necessarily reciprocated or requited, whereas NRE - by definition - happens in a relationship. Often both/all of the people in the relationship feel it together. However, it's possible for one person to be in NRE at the start of a new relationship and the other/s not to be.

NRE and crush experiences can be quite similar in the way the other person takes up a lot of our mental time and energy, our feelings towards them are generally highly positive, and it may be quite idealised or objectifying given it's often based on not knowing the person very well.

NRE and crushes are also both biopsychosocial: a complex combination of the cultural messages we've received about how love works, our own personal experiences of relationships during our lives, and the brain chemicals and bodily processes that kick in when we have strong love experiences.

What NRE closes down

As always we're cautious about anything that privileges one kind of love over other kinds. The cultural script of how NRE works is restricted to romantic and erotic love, often assuming those always happen in the same place - which of course they don't.

As with all cultural scripts this can set people up to fail: those who don't experience NRE may feel like they are missing something, or letting down a partner if that person is experiencing NRE or really wants to. There's also a cultural bias here to a western model of love: dating rather than arranged relationships, for example.

Those who do experience NRE may be carried along by this cultural script in ways that aren't good for them or others - for example idealising their partner rather than seeing them as they really are, or drifting away from the other close people in their life, or failing to see signs that the relationship might not be a good one for them. Also, the NRE script can set people up to find the

rest of the relationship a disappointment after the early, heady days when everything seemed perfect. NRE can be part of the relationship escalator, meaning that we feel we have to keep following the culturally normative stages of a relationship if it started that way.

In NRE we can be searching for things that are missing in ourselves from the other person, or latching onto kinds of love we yearned for - and perhaps didn't receive - in childhood. This is one of the reasons it can feel so enticing and wonderful, but also requires caution lest we put too much pressure on this person or relationship to heal all the wounds of the past, to be The One perfect person, or to prove we are loveable when we struggle to believe it ourselves. Reading about relationships and exploring our own relationship patterns can be helpful here.

There's a risk too that NRE happens partly because we are only showing certain sides of ourselves to a partner - and vice versa. It feels so perfect because we're not being real. While NRE might then give us the sense that we're a wonderful, loved, desired person - this may be a fragile state if it's not based on showing all sides of us, or being real.

What NRE could open up

Following on from this point, NRE if you are being very real with a new person in your life can be an extraordinary, validating experience. What might it be like to be open, vulnerable, and honest about the whole of who you are and still have somebody reflecting back how awesome that is? This is by no means easy, of course, and it's wise to build trust and intimacy with new people in our lives. Such openness can also help us to figure out where we're on the same page - and where we're not - rather than trying to follow a cookie cutter approach to the relationship (check out the zine Make Your Own Relationship User Guide for more on this).

We might also think about inviting NRE into other relationships in our lives: friends, family, colleagues, etc. instead of restricting it to romantic/erotic relationships. Can we rewrite the script of when NRE happens? Might there be periods of renewed energy of all kinds throughout a relationship? Relationships over time often go through cycles, rather than starting energised and becoming less so, especially if we're open to that.

When in NRE what happens if we intentionally draw on that energy instead of losing ourselves in it? For example, we might allow it to crack us open - the way major experiences like love, grief, and surviving a crisis can. We might find ways to allow ourselves to open to more of our feelings through the experience of NRE, or use it to go back to love feelings in the past and reflect on our relationship patterns and how we want to do relationships in the future. We could try to look at all the people in our life through the lens of NRE: what if everyone was as precious as this new love of ours? Friends, strangers, and the people we find difficult.

Using New Relationship Energy (NRE) to Open Up rather than Close Down

March 2018

I thought I'd write a bit about New Relationship Energy (NRE) here. It's a topic that the wonderful Sophia of Love Uncommon has been writing some very useful posts on recently. She covers what NRE is, and what to watch out for when you're in it. I'm going to summarise her points here for people new to the concept, and then explore another theme of how we might use NRE to open up to our other love/s rather than closing down.

What is NRE?

Sophia describes NRE as 'the emotional experience at the beginning of a sexual and/or romantic relationship (which) includes heightened emotional and sexual excitement, and sometimes obsessive thoughts and urges to be intensely connected with the other person'. In her first post she talks about where NRE comes from in terms of chemicals and emotions.

I particularly appreciated Sophia's reflections on how profound it is to be seen by a new person. In the new edition of Rewriting the Rules (out now people!) I reflect on how, in the past, my relationship pattern was to try to shape myself to fit what (I thought) other people wanted me to be. My last few experiences of NRE have been perhaps even more profound then, as they have involved an intentional revealing of myself – even the vulnerable parts. To be seen and found loveable in those places is an intense and wonderful experience indeed.

Sophia also draws on Esther Perel and Barbara Carrellas to explore eroticism in NRE: how that can be much easier with new partners who we haven't established patterns with, than with older partners with whom we might not have the spaciousness needed for eroticism. Sophia suggests that erotic encounters often need a balance of risk and safety which can be easier to find in NRE.

What to watch out for

In her second – hugely helpful – post, Sophia comes up with nine things to watch out for during NRE. I love the idea of balance between embracing NRE (which, let's face it, is an incredible feeling and offers so much in terms of the potentials of this new connection) and approaching it intentionally, or consciously, in this way.

The nine things Sophia lists to watch out for are:

1. Losing interest in our passions
2. Spending less than half the time we used to with our other close people
3. Stopping doing things we need to function (e.g. eating, sleeping, washing, physical activity)
4. Massively changing our life to accommodate the new person in a way that interferes with things like our work or sleep
5. Using the majority of our productive and creative energy on the new relationship instead of things like work, study, hobbies
6. Spending most of our conversations with other people talking about them to the point where it receives desperate eye-rolls rather than fond teasing
7. Making non-negotiated changes to how much time we spend with other close people
8. Making life-changing commitments to the new person even though we've only known them 3 days/weeks/months
9. Lying to our close people about the degree of connection we have with the new person

I encourage you to read Sophia's post for the details on each of these – but what a useful checklist right?

Opening up and closing down

If you've read my other stuff you'll know that opening up and closing down is a big thing for me. Whatever I'm talking about I'm always asking 'what does it open up?' and 'what does it close down?' Most things have the capacity to do both.

Reading Sophia's list I was struck that I've definitely had the experience of NRE doing those things, but for many of the items I've also had the opposite experience. There have been times when NRE has left me feeling way more creative and energised about my projects, for example, or making life changes which have been part of an ongoing trajectory that's taken me closer to what – and who – I want to be, not away from it.

However, there's certainly a big risk with NRE that it does result in us spending less time and energy on our existing relationships and/or feeling the love that we have in those places diminished in comparison to the new shiny love feelings.

So I got to thinking, how might we intentionally draw upon our NRE to open us up to the other relationships in our lives rather than to close us down? Here's a few ideas I've come up with so far.

1. **Looking at other people with our NRE eyes**

There's a Buddhist meditation where you imagine a friend, a stranger, and an enemy and cultivate feelings of loving kindness towards them, perhaps by picturing each of them from the moment of their birth through to the moment of their death, and touching on the things that are meaningful to them in the same way that the things you value are so meaningful to you.

I thought that we might use NRE in a similar way. One common experience during NRE for me – and I suspect many of us – involves waiting in stations. When waiting for the heart-stopping sight of my person walking towards me I've started to do a type of loving kindness practice. I try to look at each person coming towards me with those NRE eyes, imagining that I'd connected with them in the same way: that it was them I was about to spend the afternoon with them finding all about each other. It's a great reminder that each of those people is a precious, complex human being, worthy of love.

2. **Being present to all of our people**

Turning to the close people in our lives, a similar thought experiment can be helpful. How can I be present to this person and see them anew, rather than only seeing them through the lens of everything I already know about them and all the assumptions I have based on this?

Our delight in learning about the new person can exacerbate a sense of stuckness around older relationships, or it can be a helpful reminder that – like the new person – everyone in our lives is constantly shifting and changing, and has many facets to them. Can we take this opportunity to connect in older relationships in new ways, and/or to open up to new aspects of each person.

3. **Bringing all of ourselves to older relationships**

Relatedly, one thing that's easy to do in NRE is to bring newly emerging sides of ourselves out in the new relationship because it's less risky to do it there than it is in existing relationships where we could face surprise, or rejection, if we start acting differently.

A useful challenge here is to reflect on the sides of ourselves that we're bringing to the new relationship – perhaps more playful, sexy, or vulnerable sides – and intentionally try to bring them out in our older relationships too. We might notice when we struggle to do that, and withdraw. We could talk about this openly and/or deliberately cultivate situations in other relationships where we can most easily bring those sides of ourselves.

This is not to say that all sides of ourselves need to be expressed in all our relationships, but it can be useful to think about which sides we express and where, especially if we're tending to bring out newer, shinier selves in NRE only (more on this in my Plural Selves zine).

4. **Appreciating older loves for what is precious in them**

Cultivating appreciation is another useful practice that can follow from some of these other suggestions. What is it about our existing close relationships that are so precious? Looking at them through NRE eyes can help to remind us of those things. For example, it is wonderful and intense to be seen and met by somebody new, and how utterly wonderful that this person who has been in our lives for X many years still sees us and loves us even though they've probably seen us at our worst.

We might also appreciate, for example, comfortable companionship, the capacity we have to be vulnerable with this person, the conflict intimacy we've developed through getting through tough times together, or caring and being cared for. We could reflect on how each relationship in our life has changed over time and appreciate ourselves, and the other person involved, for supporting each other in the people we're becoming.

It can be great to share these appreciations with the other people in our lives when we have them, and also perhaps reassuring for those who may have fears around our NRE and the impact it will have on our other relationships. Also we might consider having some of the conversations of the 'how are we going to do this relationship?' type – which we're having with our new person – in our other existing relationships too, given that relationships change over time and ongoing consent is always a good idea.

5. **Appreciating different kinds of love**

Something I write about a lot is the value of different kinds of love – beyond sexual and romantic – in our lives. I've just finished reading Everything I Know About Love by Dolly Alderton, which includes some great reflections on the tendency of people to prioritise partner relationships over close friendships in NRE, and how painful that can be. I love how the book calls into question what we even mean by romance, in the intensely romantic descriptions of some of Dolly's friend relationships.

I think it's worth reflecting on the NRE we can experience when connecting with all kinds of love (friendships and collaborations, and relationships with companion animals, great new authors, and new projects are some of the ones that jump out at me as having similar features).

Also, again, can we draw on this NRE to cultivate appreciation of all our relationships? One thing we might share with our new person is a description of all the other important relationships in our lives. That can be a great time to remind ourselves what's so precious about those people and to tell the stories of those relationships. Again we might then go back to those relationships with new appreciation.

6. **Loving ourselves**

Finally, NRE offers a brilliant opportunity to cultivate love for ourselves. Check out this amazing person who is finding us hot and exciting and delightful and wants to make space in their lives for us. We must be pretty awesome right?

The closed down version of this, as Sophia points out, is where we get into craving that feeling and believing the new person is the only person who can give it to us, so we close down to other relationships and place all our energy in the NRE.

But the opening up option is available to us as well. If we can draw on the NRE to challenge ourselves to really start believing that we might be loveable, or at least acceptable and deserving of love, then that can make us more able to give and receive love in other relationships as well. If the new person is loving us even in the places where we're vulnerable, maybe we can feel a little safer sharing that vulnerability with other people in our lives, and so build greater intimacy with them.

Of course part of this love of ourselves is self-compassion. That means not beating ourselves up when we do make mistakes, close down, or flail around a bit in the intensity that is NRE. Sometimes we'll surf it like a wave and sometimes we'll fall off and find ourselves underwater for a while, and all of that is okay. It's a good time to check in with yourself about your preferred self-care practices and to put them in place to help you through.

Slow Relationships

Slow Relating

Spring 2020

There is so much to do, there is so little time, we must go slowly – Taoist saying

Something I've been reflecting on a lot recently is the pace of relationships. In fact I've been reflecting on the pace of everything, but I'm going to focus on relationships here.

After all the big changes in my life last year it feels like I've received a huge message that I need to slow down on everything – in the form of what I'm now understanding as cPTSD symptoms.

At the same time – and very fortunately – I have the opportunity to slow down, because my work and living situations have changed in ways that allow me way more space around everything. It's chicken and egg really of course. Have these symptoms intensified because I've slowed down enough to notice them finally, rather than distracting into busy-ness with work and people as I used to do? Or is it because of the intensity of the symptoms that I've finally slowed down? Probably both/and.

Whenever I write or talk about self-care practices with my co-authors Alex and Justin, we're very careful around the question of time. I'm well aware of the huge privilege I currently have to slow everything down. Many people simply can't afford to do this given the commitments in their lives. We always try to focus on practices and processes that are affordable and possible around a 9-5 job and family relationships, and/or around managing chronic health conditions, for example.

However, perhaps slowing down relationships is something that is more possible for everybody given that in many ways it requires less time, rather than more. For this post I thought it would be fun to put the fastest side of myself (Tony) in conversation with the slowest side of myself (Ara). I figured he could best interrogate her about the value of slow relating, given it's definitely not something that comes easily to him (think the George Michael song Fastlove for Tony). If you haven't read one of my plural blog-posts before and aren't sure who these people are, feel free to check out my Plural Selves zine, and my Free Book on Plurality. But hopefully you don't need to get that part in order to find the content here useful.

Tony: Well this is going to be interesting: the fastest talking with the slowest. Shall I just leave a question here and come back next week to see whether there's an answer yet?

Ara: I think I might manage it a little quicker than that Trouble, but I would appreciate some time to consider my answers.

Tony: We're so different on that, you and I. I've learnt that if I allow myself to respond spontaneously in the moment often what comes out is pretty good, way better than the old pattern of monitoring every little thing we say and do. Certainly the times when I make people laugh – which I love – the funny line just comes out, without any thought about it.

Ara: I suspect it's not about fast versus slow – which is good and which is bad – but more about recognising the capacity for both in all of us, and knowing which situations call for which. That kind of realness you're speaking about: that can come both from allowing yourself the immediate response, and from slowing right down before you respond. Both approaches can be a useful way around the attempt to predict and control everything.

Tony: Woah this is getting deep already. But I expected no less from you Ara. Can we dial it back a bit? What exactly do you mean by slow relating?

What is slow relating?

Ara: *smiles*

Tony: What?

Ara: Well you just did it, didn't you?

Tony: Oh… yeah I guess I did! So asking to slow it down in conversation would be an example of slow relating.

Ara: It would. A micro-moment of it I guess. I like that. We were planning to focus here on slowness in relation to the whole trajectory of a friendship or partnership, but perhaps it's useful to consider the pace of relating at all levels: micro to macro. And, again, it's not about saying that fast or slow is better, more about ensuring that nobody is being forced to go faster than they feel comfortable with, and that everybody feels able to say if that is happening.

Tony: We thought of a metaphor yesterday when we were watching This Is Us. Randall and Kevin were running together and felt like they had to keep pace because of the competitiveness between them. Pace in relationships could be seen like that. If person A runs regularly, and person B doesn't, it would be really bad for person B to try to keep up with person A. They'd likely end up injuring themselves and being unable to run at all.

Ara: Right, and to extend the metaphor, it may be that those who have reason to struggle more in relationships need to go slow rather than fast, just as people with health problems may need to walk rather than run. But it's also not intrinsically better to be a runner or a walker right? Runners may well be fitter in some ways, but they also run the risk of more injuries.

Tony: Hm I'm now mentally comparing the intoxicating feelings of fastlove to the runner's high, and heartbreak to those injuries.

Ara: Hurts a little more than shin-splints huh? Tony I'm aware that you started by asking me for a definition of slow relating. I guess it means taking any and all stages of any kind of relationship – including the one with ourselves – intentionally slowly.

That might mean deliberately choosing to see people at a certain frequency, or to spend certain amounts of time with them when you do – a couple of hours rather than a whole weekend perhaps. It could be about frequency or amount of contact between time spent together: phonecalls, messaging and the like.

I like the word 'spacious': it can be about having enough space between contact to reflect on any conversations or dynamics between you. But it's probably not just about time. Slowness can also be about intensity, trust, or closeness. It can be about consciously building those things gradually rather than leaping into a certain level of intensity, trust, or closeness without much sense of whether each of you – and the dynamic between you – can support that.

How does slow relating work?

Tony: Hm we're getting into some of the reasons for slow relating already, but can you give some real life examples before we jump into that?… You're smiling at me again.

Ara: And why d'you think that is?

Tony: Because I'm the one who keeps slowing down this conversation. I certainly wasn't expecting that.

Ara: Perhaps we're not at opposite ends of that spectrum after all Tony. Maybe we just need speed and slowness in different aspects of life.

Tony: Well I definitely need slowness in complex conversations.

Ara: I hear you. Please say if you need me to slow down at any time, and I'll try to keep checking in with you whether you're comfortable with the pace. I think it's generally on the person who is in a position to go faster to do that kind of ongoing consent checking.

Tony: Like in sex, to be consensual it has to go at the slower pace of the people involved. If one person wants a BJ and another wants to kiss, you default to kissing.

Ara: A vivid example. Thank-you for that. But yes, precisely. And if a relationship was gradually moving in an erotic direction you'd need to go at the pace of the person who wanted to take that more slowly for it to be in consent. I'd say that should be the case for any kind of relationship, not just erotic ones. Go at the pace of the person who wants to do it slower, and it's on the faster person to keep ensuring that the other person isn't feeling rushed or trying to keep to a pace that doesn't feel comfortable for them.

Tony: What are our examples of slow relating?

Ara: Well I think they highlight the benefits of slowness. I've been thinking recently that the enduring close relationships in our life – and in the lives of our friends – are often those are the ones which started slow. Also they're the ones with the flexibility in them now to adjust pace as needed.

Justin is a great example of how we like to develop relationships. The two of us attended the same events a few times over maybe a couple of years, so we had the chance to connect in a completely no-pressure way. Then we had a one-to-one coffee and chat, but with no expectation that would be more than a one-off. We both felt a good connection so we had a further coffee a few months later I think, but whoever suggested it did so in such a way that it would've been easy for the other person to say 'no' if it hadn't been for them. Gradually we found our way to a joint project together where we met up every week or so for a year. At the end of that project, again, there was a lot of room for us to slow it down if we'd wanted to, but we agreed that we'd like to work together more.

Tony: And a great podcast was born!

Ara: Alex is a good example of both the pitfalls of fast and the potentials of slow. Alex and I have talked openly about how – when we met at a conference 15 years ago – we jumped straight into bed, and into a romantic partner-type relationship. That didn't work out for us, but a year or so after breaking up we found our way – very slowly over many years – to the extremely close creative partnership we have now.

Tony: I'm looking at our close people in our photos app and pretty much all of those relationships started slow like that. The siblings are an exception of course, but even with them we distanced quite a bit for a period of years, and have recently more slowly developed a new kind of close relationship, very different to what we had before.

Ara: That's right, and another point about slow relating: it allows for periods of greater distance and closeness. I think with fastlove – is that what we're calling it?

Tony: Pray for us Saint George, yes please!

The risks of fastlove

Ara: With fastlove it can be hard not to default to the relationship script: the relationship escalator as Amy Gahran calls it. Once you're moving fast towards more time together, more enmeshed lives, or greater intimacy, it can feel like a betrayal or failure if you want to slow that down. Also putting the brakes on can need to be quite extreme because you were going so fast. If you were developing more slowly, and if you're familiar with having a slower pace at times, it can be easier to slow it down a bit and speed it up a bit depending on how connected you're feeling, what else is going on in your lives, etc. One of our friends calls it the hokey cokey!

Tony: Also with all our close people we've slowly developed the kind of intimacy where we can talk pretty openly about such things, and trust that we can navigate change.

Ara: Right, and it's very hard – if not impossible – to have that with people who you don't have a relationship foundation with: an agreed set of values – and experience of consensual relating between the two – or more – of you – which lets you know that it's possible with them.

Tony: I'm also struck by how many relationships that have ended started very fast.

Ara: True. I mean I would want to question the idea that longevity is any measure of 'success' of a relationship. Relationships which only last a decade, a year, even a day can be extremely valuable. But it seems like relationships begun quickly can really struggle to de-escalate if necessary, without it being read as an ending – with all the cultural baggage that entails. Cohabiting quickly or leaping into erotic contact or declarations of love seem to be particular red flags. Deciding to do a work project together, or spend a lot of time together, immediately would also be risky I think.

Also, we can question what a relationship begun quickly is built on, as we wrote about in that hot love post.

Tony: Hot love and fastlove huh? Slowing it down at the beginning can mean we take more care over creating the foundations of the relationship, so we don't come to a point where we need to collapse the building and put in new foundations – because the old ones weren't very stable.

Ara: Right. And it's about informed consent too. When we move very quickly at the start of a friendship, romantic relationship, or work partnership, we probably don't have enough information about that person to know whether they'll be a good fit for us. If we're strongly drawn to the relationship it simply can't be because it's a good fit, because how would we know that? So it must be other stuff that's driving it: probably a combination of social pressures and

projections we're making onto the other person of the kind of friend, partner, or colleague we long for.

Tony: And we probably take note of every sign that this relationship meets those longings, while trying to ignore any sign that it doesn't. So we're objectifying the other person, and kind of ensuring that at some point we'll have to dismantle the building and rebuild the foundations.

Ara: It's fascinating to me that our closest people now are not generally ones who we felt instantly drawn to.

Tony: Sorry guys, you're awesome but not overwhelmingly attractive!

Ara: Behave yourself. I'm saying that perhaps it's a good sign when we can notice all sorts of things about a person in the first period of knowing them: it means we haven't fallen into objectifying or pedastalling them. Again slowing down might enable us to do that: to not get caught up in the heady biopsychosocial experience of falling in love – of whatever kind.

Tony: Yeah because it can totally happen in friendships and work relationships too, especially if we've been yearning for a best mate or work partner. However perhaps erotic/romantic relationships in our society come with the biggest combo of cultural pressure plus full-on chemical chaos.

Ara: How're you doing Tony? It's a lot what we're talking about right now.

Tony: Oh yes, I notice I just sped up. Started checking emails and thinking about a bunch of other stuff.

Ara: Noticing that speeding up can be a good sign you need to go even slower I think. How about a break and finish this another time?

Tony: Yeah. Thanks. I think I'd like to read over what we already said and think about what else to cover too.

Ara: Thank-you Tony. I've enjoyed having this chance to talk.

Tony: It's not what I expected.

Ara: I've enjoyed that too, surprising you.

…

Tony: Okay then, we left it a couple of days and we're back.

Ara: Another win for slowness. We wanted to wait till we were feeling it instead of trying to write when it wasn't really there. But slow writing is a whole further blog post.

Slow relating and trauma

Tony: Talk to me about slow relating and trauma Ara.

Ara: It's something we've been learning a lot about lately.

Tony: From our reading and from lived experience. It's a lot.

Ara: It is, and again slowing down is a key element: both micro and macro. On the micro level, if we are going slower in general then we're more likely to notice that something has been triggered, often because we're aware that some fear and/or shame feelings are happening.

Interestingly our default response to that seems to be to speed up, as if we could race away from it. If we can manage to go in the opposite direction and slow right down – slow the breathing, notice what thoughts and feelings are coming up, talk to ourselves gently about what's going on – then sometimes we can move through it without it spiralling into a bigger trauma response.

On the more macro level if we have enough spaciousness in our lives then it seems more possible to notice whatever themes are present in those triggered moments, and to reach greater self-understanding through that. It also means that we can pause and wait until we're past a trauma time before we respond to whatever triggered us. And it opens up the possibility of doing something different to our usual habit: to create a new habit.

Tony: But that's more about our relationship with ourselves. How does slow relating with others come into it?

Ara: Well in relationships – for me at least – the aim is to be as beneficial as possible for ourselves, for the other person, and for everyone else in our lives and the wider world. If 'beneficial' isn't possible then at least not causing harm.

Slowing down on the micro level means we're less likely to act out or shut down on whoever triggered us – or whoever else is around – which are common responses to being triggered. On the macro level we're more likely to see patterns and dynamics that are arising in relationships and address them before they get too sticky.

Tony: It reminds me of that Matrix moment we had.

Ara: Ah that was a good example. Do you want to describe it?

Tony: We were with a couple of close friends having a conversation about something hard that had happened between them. They're people we're used to being open with, and we were all slowing down and trying to be extremely present and careful. Suddenly it felt like I could see all these paths I could go down in the conversation really clearly. Like I could see the one where I tried to make it okay for everyone. I could see the one where I tried to come off as a person who was great at this stuff. I could see the one where I tried to make this conversation go the same way as a previous one I'd had which went well. It was like in The Matrix where the bullets all slow down and you can duck out of the way of them. It felt like having a superpower!

Ara: Slowness as a superpower, I like it. And I'm glad you had that moment. It's good when we can see the potentials of doing things differently, given that a lot of the time this path we're on feels messy and hard, with no guarantees that it's actually leading anywhere good.

Tony: On the macro level slowing down seems to show us our patterns more clearly, and when we're falling into them.

Ara: Right, Pete Walker's book on cPTSD suggests that we all default more to some of the 'four Fs' than others as our default way of relating: Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn. When we notice the themes going through the things that have triggered us into that fear/shame response lately, a lot of them have been about going into the fawn response: feeling that we have to override our own consent in order to be pleasing to others, or something terrible will happen. Slow relating has meant we've had the capacity to see that, to explain what's going on to others, and to do something different in expressing what we need. When we've gone faster we've just fallen into those responses without realising it – often for quite a long time.

Tony: We should be clear that this is not an easy process, at least not for us at the moment. It's not like 'hm interesting response I wonder what's going on, ah yes it must be this old thing, let's try doing something differently.'

Ara: What is it like Tony?

Tony: It's more like: 'regular day … oh fuck excruciating pain, panic panic flail flail, I must be a terrible person, shame shame shame … minutes or hours or days or weeks stuck in that … eventual lifting out of it … oh that's what that was all about, shall we try doing things differently?'

Ara: Good description.

Tony: Why thank-you, I try. Anything to add about slow relating and trauma?

Ara: Well perhaps just a note that there probably aren't sharp dividing lines between those of us who are traumatised and those who aren't: more of a spectrum. We've written before about how trauma is relevant to everyone if we consider all forms of intergenerational trauma. Our favourite teacher Pema Chödrön writes about triggers and default responses as things which everyone does.

However we have certainly found this cPTSD literature extremely helpful. Another thing we read was that fastlove can give people a break from trauma feelings. Early stages of an intense relationship can have biopsychosocial effects which mean that we just don't feel the fear and shame so vividly at that time. This can explain both why that period can be so enticing, and why it's important to slow it down given that it might prevent us from noticing important things. Those fear/shame feelings can be horrendous, but if we can be with them rather than acting out of them or trying to repress them we may well find there's an important message in there.

Tony: Ironically the message lately has been that we were moving too fast: or felt drawn to keep pace with somebody else who was going too fast for us.

Slow relating and access intimacy

Ara: Mm and I like the idea of access intimacy here. When we go walking with friends we try to be mindful of each other's capacities. It might be that someone needs to walk slow, or to stop regularly, or to only do a short distance, or to avoid sections of walk which feel too high or precarious, or to stay on smooth rather than rough paths. This could be due to disability, to chronic or acute health conditions, to fitness, to anxiety or phobias, all kinds of things.

If we're the one with greater capacity then we try to match pace and keep checking in with the person with lesser capacity. And we've had some great experiences of being the one with lesser capacity and having the other person treat us carefully around that.

Tony: Like that time with Hannah where the quickest route home involved some potentially scary heights. She helped us name that we'd rather go back the way we came, where we would usually have pushed on in the past because we'd have assumed she'd prefer that.

Ara: Access intimacy is ensuring you know the other person's needs well and making it your business to proceed with those in mind. I love this as a metaphor for slow relating. Can the person with greater capacity keep checking that they haven't metaphorically set off on an epic journey when the other person's only up for a short hike, or look out that they're not striding ahead while the other person puffs and pants to keep up, or make sure they haven't begun a climb up a mountain which involves a precarious descent that's going to give the other person vertigo?

Tony: It all comes back to consent really. Our relationship mantra for a while has been: slow, kind, consensual.

Ara: So the consent piece is about going at the pace of the person who needs it to be slower, whether due to trauma or for any other reason. And, as with the walk, it might be that each of you needs it slower in different ways. Like one person could be up for a relationship being quite quick in terms of amount of contact, but slower in terms of being openly vulnerable with another person, and vice versa.

Tony: Right. Actually we like to go pretty quick into being vulnerable and open because we prefer big talk to small talk with anybody. But it's more the amount of time spent together and any move towards any ongoing commitment or enmeshment/entwinedness that need to be real slow. What about slowness and kindness?

Slow relating and kindness

Ara: Well it's very hard to be kind to others when the trauma stuff is playing out in a relationship much of the time. When you're stuck in that fear/shame place it can be extremely difficult to be aware of another person or to have anything to offer them. I notice that the relationships where we – and/or other people – have got most hurt are ones which have gone fast in various ways. Mostly that's because someone has ended up in a trauma place much of the time and has had to pull back for that reason.

I think it's useful to remember that question of whether this relationship is generally being good for you, for the other person, and for the other people in your life or the wider world. If the answer is 'no' to any of those, then slowing down is an important response. 'If it's not good for everyone then it's not good for anyone' is a helpful phrase to keep hold of.

It can be hard though in our culture where escalating is seen as a good thing to be encouraged, and de-escalating is often read as break-up or failure. Also those of us with trauma experiences may have been punished for asking to put on the brakes in the past, so might not find it so easy to allow ourselves to 'hokey cokey' in relationships.

I'm in a place at the moment where I'd rather go slowly from the outset than speed up and pull back, because it's hard to feel that's an okay thing to do, even though it is. I guess the more we can give each other explicit permission to slow down and speed up, the better. We can create micro-cultures of consensual speed in our communities and friendship groups.

Tony: When might it be particularly important to slow down

Ara: I think when tough stuff hits. Again it is so tempting for people to speed up at such times from a sense of urgency, but that often involves overriding a strong sense that one or more people has of not being ready yet. If we can really honour those 'not ready' feelings, then we can have a much better encounter once we are ready. We've seen that happen with friends who allowed time after a conflict before trying to have a conversation. When they finally did it was powerful because they were both in a position to hear and be heard. And, again, it's not once and for all. There may be many phases of 'not ready yet' and 'ready now' in an ongoing relationship over time.

As we've said before, living in such a non-consensual culture means that we're all bound to hurt others, and to be hurt by others. We'll find ourselves on both sides of those dynamics of having overridden another person's consent, and having had our own overridden. At such times it's vital to go at the pace of the person who has been hurt/overridden, to listen to their 'not ready' and to respect that. And it's also important not to go too fast for the other person, because they may struggle to be able to hear if they're in a defensive place. They may need to do some work before they're able to sit with somebody who they've hurt without collapsing into shame – which doesn't help anyone.

Tony: It seems like trying to push anyone to go faster than they're capable of going is never a good plan, and trying to push ourselves to go faster than we can go is also likely to backfire, even if we have really good motivations for doing so.

Ara: That's my sense, yes. How're you doing?

Tony: Well it's not necessarily the easiest thing for me to hear, as one of the faster sides of our plural system. I do fear that my speediness causes problems for the rest of you.

Balancing slower and faster desires in relationships

Ara: I think with internal relationships – as with external ones – it's got to be about dialogue. We need to go at the speed that suits the slowest sides of ourselves, otherwise they'll be left behind. Also, in relationships, there's a risk that fastlove means that other people will only meet the fastest sides of our characters, instead of the whole of us.

Tony: That feels important to me, as it's the slower parts of us who bring some important kinds of wisdom to the party.

Ara: I'll take that compliment.

Tony: I guess I'm still left with a question mark though around whether going slow in relationships of all kinds could somehow stifle something that's positive about faster people, or faster sides of a person.

Ara: I think that's an important question mark. I wonder if it's about creating safe-enough relationships and situations so that people can enjoy speed as well as slowness. Going back to our walking/running metaphor, slow-walking with one person doesn't mean that a fast person can never go for a run: they just need to do that alone or with a different friend.

Also going slow for a time can mean that speed can happen later on, in a way that feels great because those safe-enough foundations are in place. Like we felt great when we took on book projects with Alex and Justin, even though that meant a big escalation in the intensity of time spent together, and our commitment to each other. That was because we had those foundations in place. It could be like 'look before you leap, and then enjoy the leaping'.

Tony: Right, and we are finding it feels safe-enough to bring the faster sides of ourselves out in relationships where we've built up slowly. Okay I'll buy it. Slow love is the one true way, and maybe it enables a bit of fastlove too.

Ara: I'm never sure about the one true way in anything, but I know that I like slow.

Tony: It'll be a new movement. Slow love, like slow food or slow academia.

Googles

Oh looks like someone already thought of that.

Ara: I guess we'll have to stay on the slow path then Tony, instead of starting a brand new movement overnight.

Tony: Oh alright then. I'm still going to end with a slow love™ manifesto though!

The Slow Love Manifesto

- It's okay to go at the pace we need to in relationships. In fact it's probably better for everyone concerned that we do so, because it means that we can be kinder and more available to ourselves and to others.
- Pace includes how fast we go with the intensity of contact as well as the amount of various types of contact.

- It's okay to go at a different pace in different relationships: Just because you go at a certain pace with person A doesn't mean you have to go at that pace with person B.
- It's helpful to tune into your body and to how it feels when you're drawn to go too fast. Then you can become more able to notice that feeling, and to communicate to others that you need to slow down when you feel it.
- It's okay to do the amount and type of relating each day, each week, each month, etc. that feels right to you. For example, it's fine to only want to do one social thing per week, or to want some human contact every other day, or to prefer one-to-ones and never do big groups.
- It's important – for consent – to go at the pace of the slowest person in the relationship, and to have contact with them that enables them to communicate what that is, rather than suggesting things they have to say 'no' to, given how difficult this often is.
- It's okay to change pace over time in a relationship – to speed up or slow down – as long as any speeding up feels consensual for all involved.
- It's okay for all of us to struggle with changes of pace in relationships, but never to pressure another person to go faster than they want to, or to try to prevent them from slowing down when they need to.
- It's okay to say 'no' to any relationship if there's a mismatch in pace and you'd rather find someone who matches your pace, and/or to find additional relationships which match that pace.
- It's okay to not be ready for contact of a certain kind, or of any kind. We – and others – need to trust that 'not ready' feeling.
- It can particularly be a good idea to slow down at the following times: at the start of relationships, when there's powerful New Relationship Energy, when a conflict or consent violation happens between you, and when a relationship is changing, transitioning, taking a different direction, ending, being rekindled, or starting anew.

Working Dunbar's Number and Other Adventures in Slow Relating

Spring 2021

In this follow-up post to last year's Slow Relating, two of my connection-focused selves come together to explore relating in more consensual, trauma-informed and plural ways. They reflect on how Dunbar's number can be helpful for structuring relationships, how we can attend to the balance between connection and protection, and what it means to adapt relationship containers in order to be as warm and open as possible.

If you haven't read one of my plural blog-posts before and aren't sure who these people are, feel free to check out my Plural Selves zine, and my free book about plurality. But hopefully you don't need to get that part in order to find the relationship related content here useful.

Ara: Hey Tony, so good to get another chance to talk with you.

Tony: Over a year since our last post together Ara. So much has happened since then, I can't even.

Ara: Seismic shifts out there and in here. How does it feel to come back to write with me after all of that?

Tony: Vulnerable. We haven't written one of these plural conversation posts for a while. But there are a bunch of topics that we'd love to hash out together in this way - to get a better handle on them ourselves as much as anything.

Ara: So let's do it that way. Just talk together here on the page, and we can think later about whether - or how - we want to share this.

Tony: I'm more cautious than last time we wrote huh? Less fastlove leap-before-you-look than I once was.

Ara: We've learnt a lot in the past year about what drives that way of relating haven't we?

Tony: I thought I had a handle on it back then, but it was still kind of intellectual I guess: surface level stuff. Since then we've all learnt how to really feel the underlying feelings; to connect them back through the events of our lives. But that's for another blog post.

Ara: Perhaps it's enough to say for now that you are the part of us who is strongly motivated to connect with others, so much so that you've often prioritised that over other things.

Tony: Like whether it's a safe-enough connection for the more vulnerable, frightened parts of ourselves, whether it's nourishing for everyone involved in the relationship, and what that connection means for the other relationships and projects in our life.

Ara: Some of the territory we covered in our last post.

Tony: And you are the part of us who values slow moving and spaciousness: creating enough gaps and space around everything to really understand what's going on in ourselves and in others, in order to be able to act as wisely and compassionately as is possible for everyone right now.

Ara: Potentially a valuable alliance Tony: a part who is driven to connect with others, and a part who can remind us to go slowly and intentionally.

Tony: It's hard to feel valuable sometimes, knowing how my old habitual way of relating has hurt us, and other people. And how it sneaks back in without me realising it and risks doing that again.

Ara: I know love. Not to get all 'It's a Wonderful Life' on you, but maybe it's helpful to imagine what we would be like without you: without that drive to connect.

Tony: Hm, well I guess many of our other parts are mistrustful of other people, so if they weren't balanced by me we might get pretty withdrawn and isolated. Either that independent Max way of relating, not really letting anybody in or being vulnerable with other people. Or a more fear/anger driven Jonathan/Beastie mode where we tried to keep safe by staying away from others, or pushing them away from us.

Ara: There you go. It's not about eradicating our beautiful connection-driven boy - as Janina Fisher says 'no part gets left behind' - but it's about getting to know him very well and finding ways to connect, together, which work for the whole team.

Tony: Beautiful huh?

*Ara: *smiles**

Tony: You make an excellent Clarence Ara.

Ara: Thankyou. So now you're feeling a little better, shall we get on to Dunbar's number?

Tony: Right, that's what we were planning to write about. Let's do this.

Concentric Circles of Dunbar

Ara: Do you want to say what Dunbar's number is first?

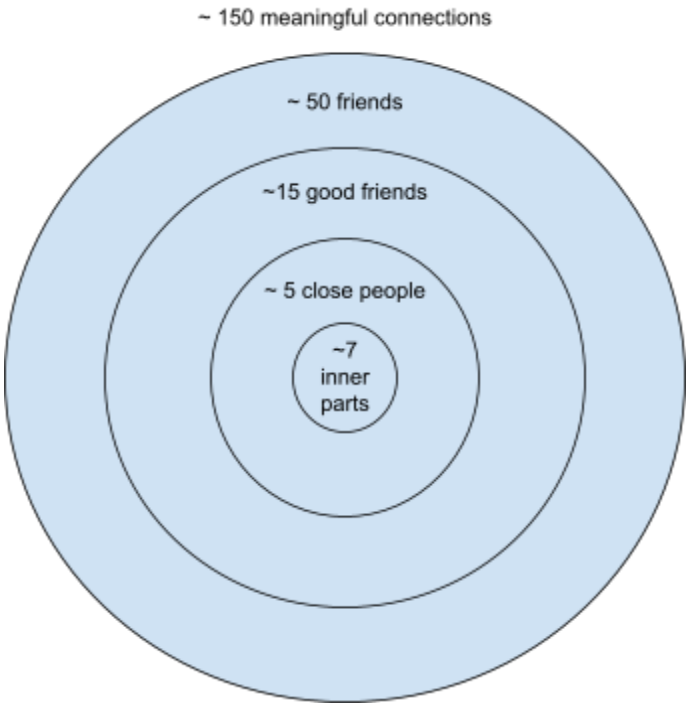
Tony: Absolutely. It's a theory of this anthropologist, Robin Dunbar, who reckoned that the human brain can only handle around 150 people in our network of relationships. When we try to exceed that things tend to conflict and crumble. Nested within the 150 meaningful contacts that we can manage, there's a sense that we have an optimum number of around 5 close people, around 15 good friends, and around 50 people we might call friends. And beyond that we can maybe manage 500 acquaintances, and 1500 people in the world who we can recognise. People can read more about the idea here. Not everyone agrees with it, and it's unlikely that those numbers fit exactly for everyone. Culture, neurodiversity, trauma, how outgoing or introverted you are, and a bunch of other stuff probably comes into it too.

Ara: Right. It might be more useful for each person to reflect on whether a nested model works for them, how they might name each level of closeness, how many people they like to have in each level, and what defines that level, for them. It could be a very helpful thing to share with other people in our lives so that we can see how aligned we are in our ways of doing relationships, and where we might locate each other.

Tony: Right. We've included something like this in a few of our books and zines. But applying Dunbar's number to it is new for us.

Ara: Shall we talk about how it works for us?

Tony: Yep. So here's a diagram: how we find it useful to visualise it.



Ara: So anyone could draw something like these nested circles and then populate it with names: the people who would go into each level for them at the moment. It can be helpful to do this regularly. We notice how it shifts over time, and how it feels like people have a direction of travel inwards or outwards, for example.

Tony: We find it helpful to check the photos and contact lists on our phone and message apps to remind ourselves who we're in contact with, and think about where those relationships might go right now.

Ara: Shall we think about what defines the levels for us Tony?

Tony: First I'd like to say something about what the model used to look like for us, mostly driven by my particular way of relating.

Ara: Sure thing.

Culture, Trauma, and Dunbar

Tony: Here goes.

Ara: Oof. Do you want to explain that?

Tony: Well thinking about Dunbar's number really helped me with this. I feel like I - and perhaps lots of people - pay very little attention to nourishing their 5, 15, and 50 relationships because they are so focused on The One and The Multitude. Like I think in the past I was highly focused on finding one, or perhaps two, really close people who would love me forever in the ways I've always dreamed of: partners and/or best friends for example. Sometimes that has also mapped onto the dream of finding a family or community where I got that kind of love. Those few people I valued more highly than myself, so I've put them in the centre of the diagram. Like I would put far more emphasis on their opinion of me than on my opinion of myself, and often try to shape myself to be what I thought they would most approve of. That's why I've put a dotted line between me and them, because I could get pretty enmeshed and entangled - losing myself in that relationship.

There's a big gap between the inner circle and friends because I would tend to only really be vulnerable, open and authentic with The Ones.

Then the other group I put a lot of emphasis on were people 'out there', hence the other dotted line on the outer circle. It didn't really matter whether somebody was a friend or a stranger, I would listen to their opinion of me equally, and I would want people I didn't know to validate me, and take it to heart if they attacked me or told me something was wrong with me.

Ara: It sounds like a very common model in our culture at the moment Tony. Searching for The One true love, best friend, or group to 'complete us' and make us feel acceptable - when we've been taught by neoliberal capitalism to believe that we're not. And also looking for our self worth to be affirmed online by the number of likes our posts receive, or the number of friends or followers we attract.

Tony: It's not just me then?

Ara: Absolutely not. I would say that our current - rather toxic - culture meets trauma in a pretty devastating way here. Indeed Alex would argue that the culture is traumatising so perhaps we can't even tease culture and trauma apart.

What we know about developmental trauma is that it leaves us - perhaps unconsciously - searching for the kinds of care and protection that we lacked, or lost, as children. Hence we tend to project all of that yearning onto specific others - often partners or family-like groups - hoping that they will give us that, and that we'll finally feel fulfilled.

At the same time, trauma leaves us highly vulnerable to attack from others. We're hypervigilant for anything that feels like judgement, and we find it very hard to discern between fair criticism and bullying behaviour, and between people whose views are worth listening to and those where there's good reason to be suspicious. Pretty much any kind of criticism - from anyone - will plunge us into shame and self-hatred.

Tony: So it makes sense that people become very focused on The One and The Multitude.

Ara: And so tragic really, because that yearning for connection is such a valuable impulse. As many therapists have pointed out, when we've been traumatised in relationship it is in nourishing relationship that deep healing can occur. Also human beings are interconnected and interdependent, so that sense that connection is vital is accurate.

The problem is that culture and trauma channel all of that impulse for connection into a very small number of individual people who can never live up to all of the hopes and fears that we project onto them. And they also channel that impulse into a vast number of strangers who have built no kind of relationship with us, and will therefore find it easy to treat us in dehumanising ways - such as dismissing us as bad, wrong or unacceptable - as they've been encouraged to do by this highly toxic culture and by their own trauma.

Tony: So we keep getting retraumatised in relationships, which repeats the earlier traumas that put us there and perpetuates a culture of cruelty where everyone is attacking and defending themselves 'out there' all of the time...

Ara: ...instead of focusing on the kinds of relationships that really could hold us and help us.

Tony: It's tough Ara. Even though I totally buy this now, I still keep finding sneaky ways to turn somebody - or somebodies - in our life into that projection of hope. If only *they* would love me in that way, or tell me that I'm okay, then maybe I could believe it. And we still find ourselves instantly believing any negative thing that anybody says rather than running it through a filter of whether that person actually knows us.

Ara: My sense is that if we really knew anybody - like their whole history and what makes them tick - then we would find understanding and compassion for them.

Tony: We call it the backstory effect. Like watch any of the medical or firefighter dramas that we've been bingeing during the pandemic and you'll see characters acting in outrageous ways that other characters attack them for. But we - the viewer - know their backstory, so we just feel for them deeply even as we're yelling 'no, don't do it!' at the screen.

Ara: One thing that Dunbar's numbers do for me is to get me thinking about whose opinions we value. In the first diagram we shared, our self (or in our case selves) are in the centre. We are always the person who knows us best. Tibetan Buddhism has a slogan 'of the two witnesses, hold the principal one', which means that whatever anybody else thinks of us, it's the view of the principle one - ourselves - which we need to prioritise.

Tony: Mm, of course within this culture, and this experience of trauma, our views of ourselves can actually be pretty skewed.

Ara: So the emphasis is on building a deep friendship with yourself (or selves) in order that the principle one actually does become the most trustworthy. And around that, building trusting relationships with others such that we can know that what they say is likely to be coming from a place of care for us and care for themselves.

In fact one of the things that would define those closest relationships for me would be people who deeply trust our own wisdom to know how we need to be and what we need to do in our life. They would also prioritise our own knowing of ourselves over their knowing of us, and would prefer us to do what felt right to us over what served them in some way.

Tony: That's the kind of love we've written about before, which thinkers like bell hooks and Erich Fromm refer to.

*Ara: Nice to see you've been listening to our more philosophical parts Trouble *grin**

Dunbar and slow relating

Tony: Okay so how does Dunbar's number relate to the kind of slow building of relationships which we covered in our last post Ara?

Ara: What do you think?

Tony: Always turning the question around. Alright, well it makes me think that nowadays I would want somebody to hang out in the 150 for a while before moving into the 50, and then there for a while before the 15, and definitely there for a good while before moving into the 5.

Ara: Not so much what we used to do huh?

Tony: We… well I... used to move people right into the 5 on the basis of one connected conversation, or an erotic or romantic attraction. Like more than once I said 'I love you' after a few weeks of messaging with someone, or moved in with them a few weeks or months into a relationship.

Ara: So we now think of connecting with people erotically, cohabiting, having everyday contact, naming 'love', and developing a close creative collaboration, as all things we'd only want to do with folks in the 5 or 15. Although of course for other people the kinds of connection that are specific to those inner levels may be different. We would want that sense of having gradually developed trust and closeness with a person - probably over a number of years - before they were at that level.

Tony: Right, those are the things that spook our 'fraidy parts: sudden declarations of love, crush, or friendship, or people slipping into expectations of regular contact, physical touch, or requesting crisis support, without having developed that trust over time, and having an explicit consent conversation.

Ara: Our 'fraidy parts', is that what we're calling them now?

Tony: Not in hearing distance no.

Ara: Heh. It has been very useful though, to understand that we have - in us - parts who are driven by the fear of annihilation by others and the hope of safety, and parts - like you - who are driven by the fear of abandonment by others and the hope of belonging. And those parts can often feel in conflict as you prioritise connection over protection and they do the opposite. We'll come back to that shortly.

I'm also thinking about how this model opens up the possibility for what we might call more intentional - or conscious - relating. Instead of people assuming what makes a partnership, a close relationship, or a friendship, for example, this enables there to be communication about what these things mean to each person, and whether there's a good fit between us in our understandings and expectations.

It feels important that nobody is assumed to be in a specific place in our life due to something like being part of the same community or family, having erotic or romantic attraction, or having known each other a long time ago. The important questions are more like: 'is this relationship mutually nourishing for us both?' and 'at what level of connection is it most mutually nourishing?'

Defining Dunbar's levels

Tony: Can I say what defines each level of closeness for us? It's still a work in progress but we're finding it useful to articulate - to ourselves and others - what makes something a friendship, or a close relationship.

Ara: Go ahead.

Tony: I'm going to try to make a list. These seem to be the defining features of friendship for us:

- We're invested in supporting each other in our projects and in our other important relationships.
- We share a commitment to being as kind and caring as possible with each other, assuming that we're doing our best.
- We can each bring all of ourselves to the relationship, including our vulnerable parts (more explicitly in a plural way with our closest people).
- We value each other's freedom over what they might be for us. For example we'd rather they were in consent than overriding their consent in order to be in contact with us in some way we might like.
- We each trust the other person to know themselves best. When we don't understand something that they are feeling or doing we assume that it does make sense.

- We each respect where the other person is on their journey - and their sense of what their path needs to be - rather than believing they should be in a different place or follow a different path.
- We share a commitment to doing The Work with ourselves, and seeing that as a lifelong journey (that might manifest in engaging in ongoing spiritual/therapeutic practice, for example, and continuing to cultivate a supportive network of people).
- We're up for being transparent about the relationship with each other and with our other good friends, so that problems don't get hidden, and we have other people to support us through any tough times.
- We try to notice when we're reactive and refrain from communicating when we're in that place. We try to acknowledge the impact it has when either of us *does* communicate from a reactive place, as well as having a lot of kindness for where that comes from in terms of trauma, and for how incredibly painful it can be when we realise we've hurt someone else with our reactive habits.
- We're up for the relationship changing and shifting Dunbar position over time depending on what's working for us (if it's not working for everybody, it's not working for anybody).

I guess that people in the category of 'friend' would tick most of these, and 'close people' would tick all - or nearly all - of them.

Ara: Right. Maybe it's the case that the closer in somebody is on the diagram, the more aligned we are in terms of these values and ways of relating. And we're interested in spending the most time - and having the most overlapping lives - with those who are most aligned. In those cases we're most engaged in supporting each others' projects, and doing ongoing practices to nurture the relationship.

Tony: With the 150 - or the 50 - it may be more that we have shared interests - although with us this geeky stuff about how we relate with ourselves, each other, and the world, is always a pretty important one. But the closer in relationships need to have more of a shared way of understanding and doing relationships, for us.

Connection and protection

Ara: I'm thinking that there's two different components here, aren't there? It's about both connection and protection.

Tony: Right, the closer relationships are the ones which feel more connected, and so it feels most enjoyable and meaningful to hang out there, like we can be ourselves and belong. *And* those relationships are also the ones where it feels we've built up enough trust to feel safe enough there. We feel protected enough that we don't have to worry that the person may suddenly lash out at us, or try to constrain us, for example.

Ara: And we've gone through enough relationship ruptures and repairs with them to know that we can get through - at least some of the - challenges that might come up together.

Tony: I feel like I used to prioritise connection way over protection. If it felt like a good connection with somebody I would ignore or accept it if they hurt us or tried to restrict us. Almost like I thought that was the price of entry for connection. That's the big shift I'm trying to make now: to value myself enough to believe that I can have both connection and protection.

Ara: Meanwhile our 'fraidy parts' work on taking the risk of connection where there is evidence that the relationship can be protective enough.

Tony: And the part of us who is best at clear-seeing and boundaries helps us to discern which relationships those are, and to articulate the level of relating we're up for with various people.

Articulating that does risk us feeling like we're letting someone down if we can't give them what they want. That's something which often brings up a lot of fear (that they will overstep our boundaries) and shame (that we should be what they want us to be regardless of what we want). It also risks us feeling rejected if the person doesn't want the level of closeness with us that we think we'd like with them.

Ara: Back to annihilation and abandonment. Again this is why slowly deepening closeness feels better to us, because we can get a really good embodied feel for the relationship before getting closer, as well as having explicit consent conversations about what getting closer means for us, and for them.

Tony: Going back to my old way of relating, with this model it makes sense to invest the most time and energy in the closest-in relationships, ensuring that we're being relatively even between all of the 5, and all of the 15, rather than focusing on just one or two of them. We can usefully ask ourselves what relationships at this level need, in order to nurture them, and check if we're continuing to do that. That's pretty different to the wider cultural model where you take good existing relationships for granted and focus all your time, energy and specialness on the shiny, new ones.

Ara: Which we would now see as at the outermost level. I'm also thinking about something we spoke about last time Tony, what one of our friends calls the hokey cokey.

The hokey cokey

Ara: The hokey cokey is the sense that it's okay - vital even - for relationships to get closer and more spacious over time: to move up and down the levels in our model.

Tony: In out, in out, shake it all about!

Ara: And that's something that we - and others I'm sure - struggle with. That's down to a combination of culture and trauma too I suspect.

Tony: Right. This feels exciting, I haven't really thought this through before.

Ara: Go for it Tony.

Tony: So the cultural piece is that we tend to equate closer in with better. Like those in our innermost circle have won the game of MJ or something! Like somehow it's winning for them to be so close in, and someone it's winning for us to have them there. So it'd be losing for them to move further away.

Ara: A kind of neoliberal capitalist model: more equals better, and perhaps a sense that they have us or we have them if they're in that close. That 'having' ownership model of love.

Tony: And the trauma piece relates to abandonment - my stuff - like someone moving from closer in to further away can easily be read as rejection of me, triggering that sense that there's something wrong with me, people always leave me, blahblahblah.

Ara: Which in turn triggers your defense of self-deprecating humour perhaps?

Tony: Damn you.

Ara: I see you Tony.

Tony: *grin* alright. So what's the alternative to closer in equals better, and moving away is bad?

Ara: I think it's something we've recently explored with a couple of friends where we've explained that deliberately keeping the relationship spacious and going slow is a sign of how deeply we value it, not of it being of lesser value. Better to keep a relationship in the 50, or the 15, for long enough that we can mutually evaluate whether it feels good there. And by then we would have become familiar and practiced enough with each other to explore whether moving closer might be something that would work well for us both, and what that would look like if we did. We would also feel able to discuss how we'd enable each person to step back again if we tried it - got more information - and realised it wasn't working for us.

Tony: It's about fit really huh? Where on this model is the best fit for this person - with us - at this point in time? And that gets us to that 'warm and open' question we've been asking a lot lately.

Maximising warmth and openness

Ara: I'm finding that so helpful. The question we ask ourselves goes something like 'what container does this relationship need in order for us to be as warm and open as possible within it?' In that sense the relationship 'goal' shifts from 'as close in as possible' to 'wherever we need to be to maximise warmth and openness'.

Tony: That feels a bit like that consent shift from the goal of a date being sex (whether or not consent happens), to the goal of a date being mutual consent (whether or not an sex happens).

Ara: And it helps in letting other people know why we're suggesting certain boundaries - like a certain kind or frequency of contact. We explain that, for us, it's about trying to find the sweet spot where we can be sure of being able to feel really warm and open with them. We notice that when we find - and articulate - our boundaries, we often feel much more fondness for the other person, and more able to open up to them. When we feel pressure to be something more for them - either from them or from our own internal sense of how we should be - then we often feel frightened and withdrawn, or resentful and brittle, for example.

Tony: I'm also thinking that the capacity to hokey cokey with people is potentially less likely to retraumatise everyone. The culturally normative model tends to have people going suddenly from the inner circles to the outer limits if there's any kind of conflict or rupture. That's often felt as a total abandonment - and annihilation I guess because we can take it as evidence that there must be something terribly wrong with us. It's so much more helpful - and less retraumatising - if each relationship can become more close or more spacious - if it can expand and contract in that way over time.

Ara: And we're up against a lot in trying to do that. Like you say culture and trauma, because there's a lot of external and internal pressure to completely sever a relationship when there's a rupture, to either label the other person bad and reject them entirely, or to label ourselves bad and be so swamped in shame that we can't handle their presence. And trauma makes us more likely to experience increased spaciousness in a relationship as abandonment, and either to push the person away entirely because we're so hurt, or to try to cling on in a way that makes them distance themselves more.

Tony: I'm sure that nobody round here would ever do any of those things Ara.

*Ara: *chuckles* like I said we're up against a lot with that interwoven culture and trauma piece. All of us are.*

Tony: Is there anything else to say about the hokey cokey?

Moving up and down the levels

Ara: I suppose I'm wondering whether - in addition to putting more time and energy into the closer-in relationships - we might also put particular time and energy into relationships when they are moving up or down a level, to ensure that that is as caring and consensual a process as possible.

Tony: Mm I notice that relationships in those kinds of places, perhaps with a question mark around whether they might need to move closer in, or further away, feel kind of edgy. There's an

impulse in me to put too much time and energy into them too - like in a rush to figure out where they should be and pin them down.

Ara: Mm good point, it's about the quality of the time and energy more than the amount of it perhaps. I like the idea that we have an honest sense - at any point in time - about what those 'on the line' relationships are for us. And we keep slowly, gently, exploring in ourselves what's going on there, until we reach some clarity around what the issues are for us, in a way that feels possible to communicate with the other person.

Tony: It's another way that I want to leap huh? Leaping to clarifying it, rather than staying with the uncertainty for long enough to get clear.

Ara: Again a pretty common struggle. But patience is important here, and getting more information. Like contact with that person - or space from them - will help us to get clearer on what's going on here that might mean we need to move closer together, or further apart.

Tony: An example for me would be that it can take some time to tease out whether the desire for more closeness is coming from my Deep Yearning of the Soul (™) or whether it's coming from a recognition that the relationship meets a lot of those criteria we mentioned and might work well for both of us at a closer level.

Ara: And for our 'fraidy parts' the question might be more whether the desire to move further apart comes from a clear sense that the level of closeness isn't working for us, or more from old stuff that's been triggered in us, which we might find a way to communicate with the other person.

Tony: Right, we have a few examples lately where those parts of us have felt that fear, taken the risk of naming what felt scary to them, and the person has responded really well, leaving us feeling way more warm and open towards them.

Returning to our sides of the street

Ara: Again trauma is such a big part of all of this. One of our close people has a great analogy for those periods where a relationship requires more spaciousness or stepping back. They say that a relationship is like walking down a street: we can both be on separate sides of the street, or we can be in the middle of the street together. When there are ruptures, or when we realise that we've become too entangled and lost ourselves, or the other person has, or we both have: those might be the moments to move from the middle of the street to the separate sides again, at least for a while.

Tony: Right. From opposite sides we can find our individual path again if we've lost it a bit. We can also look over and get a better sense of them, and their path. It might be that we've forgotten that in wanting them to be something for us, or in wanting them to be on the same path with us for some reason.

In my mind it looks more like two people finding different paths up a hill than two sides of the street.

Ara: Nice. And it can be great to be alongside each other on the same path for a while, but we can also be alongside each other on different paths when… I don't know...

Tony: …when one of us is fitter than the other, or more scared of heights. And sometimes their path may take them onto a different hill and that's okay too. Are we stretching this metaphor to breaking point yet?

Ara: I like that it's a similar one to the different paces metaphor we explored last time Tony.

Tony: Anyway it's about recognising that both closeness and spaciousness are valuable in relationships, and that the important question is what Dunbar level this relationship needs to be at in order for us to be as warm and open as possible.

Ara: And that it's okay - in fact vital - to hold that question open for a while, when relationships are in an uncertain place, rather than leaping to try to locate them again, or putting them under pressure to be in a certain place.

Nurturing inner and outer relationships

Tony: Okay onto the last bit we wanted to mention. In our Dunbar model our very innermost level isn't a relationship with another person - or people - any more, it's our relationship with ourselves.

Ara: Yes and we've stuck a number on it because we have a consistent sense of 7 selves - or parts - but this could work equally well for those who experience themselves as singular - it'd just be their relationship with themself. For those systems who have far more parts in their inner world it'd be a larger number.

Tony: It might seem obvious to put ourselves in the middle but, as I said before, for much of our life I don't think that we did - not really. If you have that sense that you have to shape yourself in order to be loved by others, or to belong, then you're putting them at the centre, not you.

Ara: I think so. And in that sense you are prioritising connection over protection rather than holding them in balance. It makes me think of what bell hooks says about valuing ourselves and others equally.

Tony: So just to be provocative, isn't putting yourself at the centre valuing yourself over others?

Ara: Just to be provocative huh Trouble? It's actually a really important question, and again I think it comes down to the quality of it. There's a way of centring yourself that is really bad for

you, and for others. In that mode we see everybody else through the lens of what they are for us, and we take everything that others do and say very personally.

Tony: Familiar. That's such a painful place to be. Like other people are hurting us all the time because they don't want to be as close as we do, or because they want to be closer than we do. And when people come at us with their stuff we internalise it and use it to beat ourselves up with. In that mode of relating other people feel very dangerous, and yet we also can't seem to stop ourselves from churning over all the relationships we've struggled with in the past - and are struggling with now. Perhaps we find ourselves obsessing over this person, while trying to eradicate that person from our mind. And none of it works and we feel worse and worse.

Ara: You're so good at describing these things Tony.

Tony: I surprise myself sometimes. I wasn't expecting to go there. In terms of our inner system that's when the whole thing seems stuck. It's me, Max, Jonathan, and Beastie all struggling simultaneously. I try to grab onto people who might prove I'm loveable and give us connection. Max tries to do a bunch of stuff to make other people respect and approve of her. Jonathan recalls every criticism everyone's ever made of us and tries to predict what we might 'get wrong' next, wishing we could hide away from everyone. And Beastie judges everything we're doing, and everyone out there. And we feel disconnected from ourselves and from everyone else.

Ara: Putting ourselves at the centre of Dunbar's model is about something very different to that, for me. I'm thinking about a quote we heard from Pema recently, in her new audio 'Journey to Fulfillment'.

Tony: Always with Pema!

Ara: I'm so grateful to her.

Tony: Me too. I don't know how we'd have got through this last couple of years without her.

Ara: Agreed. She says: 'It's that attitude about ourselves that actually we are worthy and we are basically decent and good people, and we could begin in our life to get that sense of fundamental okayness, fundamental wholeness, completeness. And the result of that would be very beneficial. That's the most benefit that you could possibly give to another person.'

Tony: Fundamental okayness sounds so good.

Ara: I know. We've been far from that for much of our life, and lately experienced being about as far from it as it's possible to get.

Tony: Almost like we had to go further away from it to get closer to it. So much paradox.

Ara: Indeed. Anyway the point is that putting yourself at the heart of the concentric circles in order to work on feeling - on knowing - that you are okay, is the opposite to that painful way of centring yourself that you described.

Tony: Right, because that painful kind of centring is not really about putting yourself at the heart is it? Because you're actually super focused on other people: still trying to get their approval, and still really scared of their disapproval.

Ara: It's such a strange one isn't it, like it's both far too much 'all about me' and far too much 'all about them'.

Tony: Instead of being all about love. See what I did there?

Ara: Very clever!

Tony: I try.

Ara: Anyway I think what we're endeavouring to do here - in our life at the moment - is to find that sense of okayness in ourselves. And part of this whole Dunbar's model thing is about that too.

Tony: Go on.

Ara: Because it's about learning which kinds of relationships - with which people - help to nourish that sense of okayness in us, and which don't, and being open about that. And it's about a desire to be that for others too: noticing where we're not that person for somebody - at least not at the moment - even if we, or they, might want us to be. And being up for retreating in those cases.

Plurality and okayness

Tony: Yeah. I see. And for us plurality is a huge part of how we're doing that.

Ara: A key way in which we're learning to feel more okay, more complete even, is making an explicit task of befriending each part of us - when they're struggling and when they're doing okay - letting them know that they are welcome no matter what, loved no matter what.

Tony: So a lot of time and energy goes to that, because 7 parts means 21 different relationships to nurture. It's not enough to just have one part loving all of us, we all have to love each other.

Ara: I might suggest 28 rather than 21 Tony.

Tony: How come?

Ara: Each part has a relationship with themselves too.

Tony: Ah shit I missed that. And that's the hardest one too. I actually feel all 6 of you loving me now - although you certainly demonstrate it in different ways! But I still struggle to love myself: to feel that I'm okay.

Ara: All four of you - Max, Jonathan, you and Beastie - hold that sense that you 'ruin things' for the rest of us, that you are the part that isn't really okay.

Tony: A work in progress then.

Ara: Yes, probably a lifelong one. And my sense is that the more we can love all of us - or know that all aspects of us are okay - the better able we will be to love other people out there. It's something that Max and Beastie touched on in their post last year about accompanying ourselves. When we see each part of ourselves with kindness and clarity - because we know how they came to be that way, and why they feel the way they do - we can see all parts of other people with kindness and clarity too.

And when we do that we are far less likely to internalise other people's attacks and abandonments, because we'll know where they come from: that sense in them that they are not okay, or that parts of them are not okay.

Tony: This model reminds me of something that we got from Pete Walker's book. He says that trauma healing requires 'reparenting ourselves' and 'reparenting by committee'. We're nurturing our inner relationships in order to reparent ourselves - like you and James caring for and protecting all of us, and all of us being able to grow up because of that. But we're also nurturing these close relationships and friendships as a kind of committee of people out there who are invested in supporting us, in reflecting back our okay-ness, maybe even when we don't think we're okay.

Ara: It helps me to weave together the Buddhist writing we read which emphasises the importance of inner work in solitude, and the trauma literature which suggests that healing can only be done in relationship.

Tony: To quote Forrest Gump, 'I think maybe it's both.'

Ara: It so often is.

Limiting the numbers, limiting ourselves?

Tony: Okay so provocative question number 2, how does this Dunbar model of only relating in a small 'village' of relationships relate to the spiritual aim to be of benefit to all beings. Like that Rumi guest house poem: aren't we meant to be striving to welcome everyone? And in limiting

ourselves to relationships that feel good to us aren't we just creating an echo chamber of people who'll tell us we're awesome, so we'll never have to address our limitations?

Ara: Well I think Rumi's poem partially answers your question Tony, because it's actually about welcoming every part of yourself in, not other people. Again it takes us back to the sense that only in so far as you can befriend every part of yourself can you really befriend others. I don't think that it helps other people if we fling open the door to everyone and then find that we can't be alongside them without freaking out.

Tony: It's window of tolerance stuff isn't it? Knowing our limits. And the concentric circles are about that too. What level of relationship we can be in with people and stay grounded - so we're able to be warm and open? We're not of much benefit to ourselves or others when we're going into an overwhelmed or retraumatised state on the regular.

What about the echo chamber question?

Ara: It's a similar point I think, that repeatedly plunging ourselves into overwhelm by engaging with people, opinions, and ways of behaviour that are very jarring to us doesn't actually help us to expand our window of tolerance, or our horizons.

I do think it's very important that we learn to be alongside people who are different to ourselves - and have different views - in a world where polarisation and 'us and them' thinking is such a problem. But from what I've read from social justice and from various spiritual traditions, the only way to do that which seems to work is in relation.

The practices which work for bringing people together who have very different views - or who are in conflict - involve nurturing trusting relationships between them which are held and supported by those around them, and helping them foster understanding and compassion for each other. Only at that point can people really hear those differences without trying to make the other person bad, or rejecting them.

Tony: I'm thinking that again it comes back to seeing connection and protection as a both/and rather than an either/or.

Ara: Right! Say more.

Tony: The 'echo chamber' idea stems from the assumption that if relationships are protected (safe enough) they won't be connected (honest enough). That's the same idea that we can only get connection or protection, never both. If we have real connections with people they'll end up being too dangerous, and if we have safe enough relationships they won't be real.

But what we're trying to cultivate are relationships where the safety comes from the level of trust and deep knowing of each other that we've built, so it's the connection that gives us protection.

And, feeling that level of protection, we can afford to risk greater connection: like telling somebody when we are struggling, or feeling a tricky dynamic come up between us.

Ara: Such a good way of putting it. So at the moment we're building one group of people in our lives to support each other in being ethical and accountable in our work. Recognising that this would inevitably involve vulnerable conversations about the times we've messed up, the group is working to slowly develop trust and deep knowing of each other, so when something does come up we'll understand how it is hitting the person concerned, and know how best to support them through it.

Tony: That's a great example. We're also thinking about slow moving towards staying - and potentially living - with various friends - and their people - for periods of time post-lockdowns. There's a question of how we nurture safe-enough conditions to do that, again probably with gradual shorter stays - and/or in-advance conversations - so we can be connected enough when we are there, rather than feeling we have to go back to hiding parts of ourselves, or they do.

Ara: In these examples we're explicitly attending to protection in order to allow more honest and vulnerable connection (both/and), rather than protecting ourselves by avoiding connection, or moving towards connection with little thought to protection. And we certainly notice that in relationships where we've already done this, conversations that might feel very hard elsewhere can feel relatively easy.

Tony: Absolutely, like recognising the places where we rub up against each other, or pin our hopes on each other non-consensually, or where our history together throws up certain dynamics. In those relationships it seems easier to spot, and name, those things, as well as being alongside each other in addressing the things that scare us, not hiding away from those things in a mutually reinforcing echo chamber about how great we are compared to everyone else.

Ara: Mm there's something about similarity and difference here too isn't there. Our old ways of relating required us to believe that we were very similar to partners in all kinds of ways, and any difference was felt as threatening. Whereas this way assumes people are inevitably both different and similar, and aims for an approach where we can meet each other well in both. Like Audre Lorde says, 'It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences'.

Conclusions

Ara: 8000 words probably means time to wrap up Tony!

Tony: Mm, I'm left with a concern that it's still so easy to 'pin' my yearning for protection and/or connection 'out there'. Even with this model there can be a hope that it might finally provide us with relationships that are completely safe, and where we totally belong.

Ara: I think that it does get us closer to safer, more connected, relationships. And, at the same time, you're wise to be wary, because once we start seeing it as the one true perfect model of relating that will give us all we ever dreamed of, we'll quickly learn that it isn't!

Tony: I've done this so many times, letting go of an old partner in the hope that a new partner will be everything, swearing off monogamy in the hope that polyamory will meet all our needs, swearing off fastlove in the hope that slow relating will do it for us.

It's realising that no other person - or people or relationship style - will ever make us entirely safe or give us total belonging. And, at the same time, it is worth working towards relationships which are safe-enough and connected enough.

Ara: Paradoxically dropping the hope/fear approach to relationships may give us more of the connection we hope for and less of the risks that we fear. It certainly makes it more possible to navigate when our hopes and fears crop up.

Tony: Anything else to say?

Ara: I think I'd just emphasise the importance of being where you are with relationships, not trying to be 'further along' than you are. When we've tried to be somehow 'more' for people than we're capable of, that's when we've wound up pushing - or even retraumatising - ourselves in ways that aren't actually helpful for anyone. It takes courage to be that honest with ourselves and to recognise our limits. Offering what we really can, at each level of relating, is far better for everyone than trying to offer more than we can, or to bring people into a closer level when we aren't ready for that, or don't want it.

Interestingly we've found with Max that a similar model applies to work. We can create Dunbar's rings of our various projects to consider where we want to invest our time and energy there, rather than - for example - putting most of our time into projects that don't nourish us, or believing we have to focus entirely on 'one true project'.

Tony: I'll let you and her get into that one someday.

Ara: It's been good talking with you again Tony.

Tony: Right back atcha Ara.

How to make friends

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020:
megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/how-make-friends

- Making friends is really hard because there's no script for it, representations of friendships make it look like it should be really easy, most of us have very little time to nurture friendships because of work (#capitalism), and we're taught to prioritise other kinds of relationships (romantic and family)
- So finding making friends super tough is 100% understandable and normal and don't give yourself a hard time
- Here's some ways we could make and develop friendships by tuning into what we're looking for from friend relationships, and cultivating connections to intentionally and consensually develop them into friendships
- And by the way remember that it's super hard and understandable that you don't find it easy or get it 'right' all the time. Go gently with yourself

Young and old people are often expected to be able to be friends with everyone of the same age as them - we just put them together and expect them to get on. For adults there's hardly any script for making and maintaining friendships. We're meant to prioritise romantic and family relationships over friendships. There's a sense that friendships should just happen and not require any work which is a problem because they're not that easy for most people, and not that consensual if we just 'do' friendship without ever reflecting on it. There's also ableism and neurotypical privilege involved in the expectation that everybody will find it easy to engage in social situations, automatically know how to develop friendships, etc.

Where wider culture does represent friendship it is in a very idealised way. TV shows from Friends to the Big Bang Theory are based on close, tight friendship groups where people have lots of fun and joy and hang out together. Movies often depict besties and buddies who have easy, close relationships. All this presents a model of what friendships should look like which doesn't suit everyone (some people prefer multiple one to one friendships to a group, or non-hierarchical friendships, for example), and it continues to make it look like friendship is easy when actually it's just as complex as any other kind of relationship - with the added challenge of there not being much of script of how to do it: making friends, maintaining friendships, and ending friendships.

Everything can be harder still when you have fewer friends to start with - for example if friendship is an area you find difficult, if you've just moved where you're living or working, or if you've recently lost some friendships. When it feels like potential friendships are scarce, and/or when you feel low in confidence and scared of rejection, the whole area can become more loaded and fraught.

For making friends - just like developing erotic and/or romantic relationships - a great approach is:

1. Communicate with yourself about what you want
2. Communicate with others on the basis of this to find the shared ground (e.g. to check in with existing friends, if you're putting a 'seeking friends' profile on a dating or friend-finding app, or if you're getting closer with somebody you're connected to and sense it might be a burgeoning friendship)

The Relationship User Guide Zine is a great place to start for figuring out how you want to do relationships of all kinds, including friendships. Things you might specifically think about in relation to friendship (first alone, and then with existing and potential friends, include):

- What am I looking for from friendship (e.g. mutual support, doing activities together, fun, being part of each other's team, helping each other develop and grow, etc.)
- What can I offer to a friend in terms of time, energy, resources? What would I like from a friend in these areas? What are the limits on what I can offer?
- What things do I really not want in a friendship? What are my boundaries? What would be a deal-breaker for me?
- What speed and intensity do I want at the start of a potential friendship?
- How do I like/expect friendships to develop over time?
- What do I want to commit to a friend, and have committed to me?
- How much change and flexibility am I up for in a friendship (e.g. if one person moves, forms other close relationships, has family, etc.)
- What areas of life do I want to share with friends, which are fine to be separate?
- What kind of communication do I like to do - and not do - in friendships?
- What about myself do I want to share with friends? What do I not want to share?
- How do I like to navigate conflict in friendships when it happens?

It can also be great to chat with friends and potential friendships about your other friendships - past and present - which have worked well and less well for you, to get a sense of how you both like to do friendship.

In terms of finding friends there are a lot of different ways you could go about it, and different things suit different people. Here are some ideas:

- Try to regularly attend events with like-minded people (social nights, workshops, conferences, meet-ups, etc.) Pay attention to who you connect with there and suggest meeting up one-to-one with people who you feel a click with. Cast your net wide. Some of those will be a one-off, others might develop into friendship
- Use social media groups in a similar way to get to know people who are into similar things to you, moving to messaging one-to-one with people if you feel a click. With both of these it's important to be consensual when suggesting one-to-one contact, e.g. 'I really enjoyed

talking with you about this. D'you fancy chatting one-to-one any time e.g. on skype/messenger? No worries at all if not.'
- Use dating and friend-finder apps to look for friends in your area - this can mean online contact first which can feel safer
- Get to know the friends of your existing friends if they're up for social hangouts, and/or let friends know that you'd like more friends and encourage them to introduce you to people if they're up for that.

Some things to watch out for with new friendships…
- If you're entering a new group of friends be careful that you're not taking on implicit rules about how they do things which don't feel like a good fit for you
- It's important to be mutual so make sure that you're not imposing your way of doing friendship on another person, or having theirs imposed on you. For example it's important to go at the slower person's pace and to check any assumptions you might have about what being a friend means (e.g. not assuming that suddenly you get to call that person at 1 in the morning, or borrow things from them)
- Are you being open with this new person and encouraging openness so that you can make informed choices about whether this friendship would work well for you both?
- Do you feel safe around this person? If not then it's worth slowing things right down and checking in with yourself more.
- What patterns do you have in friendships that might not be so good for you? What would be the signs that these were playing out here to watch out for? Could your other friends support you in doing that?
- Think about consent just as you would with any other relationship: What are the power differences between you? Might that impact one person's capacity to say yes, no, or maybe to things, e.g. spending more money than they want to, physical touch, or teasing? If you have more power then what can you do to increase the other person's capacity to feel free in the friendship and to express what they want and where their boundaries are

When you're on a friend date it's great to try to be present to them as they are rather than being too focused on what it might - or might not - become. There's a balance to be struck between being real and showing yourself, and not overwhelming them - or you - by sharing too much too quickly.

Intentional friendship

So how can we be intentional about our ongoing friendships? 'Intentional' means treating each other consensually, being aware - or conscious - about how we do our friendship, and aiming for the friendship to be mutually nourishing, rather than either of us trying to get something from it for ourself, or to be what we think the other person wants us to be for them.

It's easy in friendships just to default to what we think they should be, either following wider cultural scripts, or sticking with how it's always been between us regardless of what changes.

We don't really have a script for friendships being an important relationship in our life which might require talking or ongoing negotiation.

The Three Handshake consent model might be relevant here. The normal thing to do is just to assume a friendship will work in a particular way (e.g. how much time we spend together, what we do, how we talk to each other, etc.) and to do that (1st handshake). An alternative is to have big friendship conversations where we talk openly about how we want to do friendships and navigate how we'll do this one together (2nd handshake). A third way is to have a sense of ongoing noticing how the friendship is going for us both, perhaps with micro-communication about how we want things to be on an everyday basis throughout (3rd handshake).

The Consent Zine might be a helpful resource for thinking through the 2nd handshake conversations you might want to have and/or how we might notice things in a more 3rd handshake way. Potentially 2nd handshake is a useful approach when a major change or conflict occurs, whereas 3rd handshake is better for all the way through a friendship - and makes it easier to have big conversations if and when those are required. Getting practised at these micro-communications can help with the awkwardness we often feel about talking about big issues.

There's a balance to be struck here around not trying to push every friendship into an identical form, but being flexible to how the bond between any particular two people unfolds, *and* having clear boundaries around the kinds of contact that do and don't feel good for you and being able to express that.

A meta communication conversation which can be useful to have is to suss out how each person likes to communicate about such things - if at all - and what reflection they're up for doing about their ways of relating outside of the friendship.

It can also be helpful to have an image of friendships as concentric circles of closeness, being clear with ourselves and others about what we're looking for from a close friend, a general friendship, or someone we're just friendly with, for example. For example, we might require capacity to communicate and do self-reflection from close friendships, but not from people we just enjoy getting together with once in a while.

The Relationship User Guide Zine is a resource to help you figure out what kinds of relationships you want, and communicate that to others, including friendships.

Friend break-up

For anything in life to be consensual we have to know that we don't have to do it - now or ever. Being able to conceive of breaking up, or leaving, is vital in any kind of relationship, otherwise it's hard - if not impossible - for it to be fully consensual.

When might be a sign that we need to break-up a friendship

The following might be good reasons to consider ending or changing a friendship:

- If the friendship doesn't feel nourishing and fulfilling for both people. If it's not good for everybody it's not good for anybody
- If either person in it doesn't feel free enough to be themselves (in the friendship and their wider life) and/or safe enough that they'll be treated well - and treat themself well - in the friendship
- If you notice that you're not looking forward to time together and/or feel bad after time together
- If someone isn't ready for the kinds of communication that feel necessary to us to deal with issues or tensions that have come up
- If there are stuck dynamics in the friendship which feel tough and are difficult to shift (e.g. one person being very dependent on the other, or one person being controlling)
- A big power imbalance between you
- A big imbalance in the emotional labour that you're both doing in the friendship

How can we break-up a friendship?

- First we might want to think of a spectrum from friendship change to friendship ending. If it doesn't feel good for one/both of us, are there changes we could make to the structure and/or rhythm and/or understanding of the friendship which might help? Is everyone up for that conversation and able to hear each other? If so, trying to shift it into another form could be a useful thing to try. If not then ending make be easier and/or safer
- It's useful to remember that if the dynamic between you isn't working for one of you then it's not good for either of you to remain in it - it's not good to be the one who is hurting or getting hurt - so staying in it for the sake of the other person isn't a great idea for you or for them
- It's okay to end things in the way that feels safest for you. Ideally it's good to get a kind and clear message across to the other person about what's happening rather than ghosting/drifting, but this can be in whatever form feels manageable to you. You don't have to explain yourself beyond it not working for you, and you don't have to receive a response
- It's good to recognise that it's likely to be hard for both people, rather than trying to minimise the impact on either of you

How can we deal with the aftermath of a friendship break-up?

- Recognise that friendship break-ups can be just as painful as other kinds of endings, if not more so in some cases, and that our feelings are always valid whatever our role in the break-up
- Focus on looking after yourself
- Try to allow all your feelings, rather than imagining that only some are appropriate. If you feel it, it's a sensible, understandable feeling
- Get support from compassionate people in your life, letting them know how you're doing and what helps you

- You don’t have to get caught up in thoughts of blame and shame - it’s okay that this happened and that it is painful without believing that they - or you - are a terrible person. However it is useful to recognise where you have been badly treated - or treated another person badly - and work on that part

Trust

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020: megjohnandjustin.com

What is trust? How can we know when we can trust people? how can we build trust in relationships? and what can we do when trust is challenged?

Like love, trust is more something you do - in an ongoing way - rather than something you have or don't have. In fact a binary notion of trust as all or nothing is probably not very helpful. We generally feel trust in relationships where we knew we're safe-enough, and free-enough, with another person; where we know we'll be treated consensually, and perhaps where we also know difficulties will be handled well between us.

Normative ideas about trust

Normative ideas about what makes a trusting relationship, which we might want to challenge, include:

- Trust is when you know somebody won't tell other people things - actually relationships which can be more transparent and supported by other friendships may be more trustworthy
- Trust is when someone will always show up for you - actually consent and access intimacy mean someone may be more trustworthy if they can let you know when they don't have capacity, rather than overstepping their boundaries, and help you to do the same
- We should trust people quickly as a sign of love and/or respect - trust needs to be built over time, it's risky to trust people without enough information about whether they - or the relationship - is trustworthy
- There should never be any ruptures in trust, if there are we have been betrayed and must jettison that relationship - ruptures are inevitable and how we manage them is a huge part of developing an ongoing trusting relationship

Different people have different needs in relation to trust, so it can be helpful to have these conversations and to make more explicit relationship agreements.

Trust containers

It can be useful to consider the following elements of a relationship - in general, and in relation to trust:

- You and your background/baggage
- Them and their background/baggage
- The relationship dynamics between you
- The wider system and structures, culture and community, around you

It may be that with any person we could find a relationship container whereby that could be a trusting relationship, but also containers where it wouldn't be. For example, if someone is untrustworthy around money we could still have a trusting friendship if we never share finances or lend them any cash. This relationship could be a very trustworthy colleague relationship for us, but would be a disaster if we tried to have an erotic relationship.

Trust and slowness

For these reasons we need time to build trust: to learn about ourselves, the other person, the dynamics we're drawn into with them - which work well and which don't, and to develop systems and structures of support for this relationship.

Slowness is helpful in trust-building: time to put agreements in place, to find out what works for us, to build the foundations of the relationship as firm as possible, and to practice micro-moments of trust building where we say when things aren't working so well for us and learn whether the other person can adapt with us (and vice versa).

Trust and trauma

Slowness is particularly important when we've experienced trauma, or cPTSD, in our backgrounds. The risk with this is that we may not have experienced many - or any - really trusting, consensual relationships. This means we don't have a great template for this and may be retraumatised during our life because we've developed further relationships - as an adult - which weren't very trustworthy or consensual. The way forward here is to learn how to develop safer relationships, and it's often a good idea here to start with several which are small enough and slow enough, rather than hoping for a big relationship to provide all the trust and security that you haven't had before. Therapy relationships, gradual friendships, and well-held support-groups can all be good places to practise developing trust.

New relationship energy can be risky because it can suspend the feelings which tell you that things aren't safe, consensual, or trustworthy enough for a while. It can be wonderful to experience the relief from traumatic feelings like fear and shame, and that can leave you trusting that relationship and ignoring any signs it might not be trustworthy. But once the 'honeymoon period' on an intense new partnership, friendship, or colleague relationship is over, things can get difficult because this isn't a strong foundation to build a trusting relationship on.

Finally, on trauma, the literature suggests most of us default to one or more of the 4Fs in terms of our way of relating: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. That means we probably all try to get trusting relationships in problematic ways. Fight-types may try to control others so they can trust that they will stay. Flight types may go into 'doing' mode and throw everything they can at relationships to believe they can trust them. Freeze types may steer clear of relationships altogether, or disappear on them. Fawn types may try to please the other person to make them stay.

Again slowing down can help us recognise these patterns when they kick in, and shift into something else: tuning into our wants, needs, limits, and boundaries - and how these change over time - communicating these to others, and moving towards relationships where we're met, and away from those where we're not.

Trust ruptures

In therapy there's an idea that ruptures are the most important moments in the therapy relationship: if the client can say that there's been a rupture (e.g. that the therapist has hurt them), and the therapist can hear them and help them heal the rupture, that's a very therapeutic moment.

There are bound to be ruptures in trust in all relationships: moments when we inadvertently hurt the other person, or override their consent, or conflict in a painful way. Again if we can get used to naming and addressing micro-moments of such ruptures that may mean we can trust our relationship to hold it when a bigger one happens.

When there is a rupture it's great to slow down so everyone can process what's happened, and what it's brought up for them. It's important only to come together to communicate about it once everyone is definitely ready, and to get support from others with this if necessary. Once together it's about really hearing each person's experience and coming to a mutual understanding of what happened and how to proceed.

It can be hard for many of us to trust that trust is even possible - that in itself involves a leap of faith. But if we can develop slow, steady trusting relationships - and learn to navigate ruptures over time - then our trust in our own trustworthiness, and our capacity to build trustworthy relationships, can increase.

Monogamy and Non-Monogamy

(For more on this see my Relationship Struggles zine)

Monogamy

December 2014

Are we hardwired to be monogamous or is it a social construct that is arguably unnatural?

Like most aspects of human experience our relationships styles are biopsychosocial. It's not a matter of nature or nurture, hardwiring or social construct. Rather the way we form relationships is influenced by a complex web of biological, psychological and social aspects which would be impossible to disentangle.

Certainly the diversity of relationship styles across humans and other animals suggests that it is very unlikely that any one kind of style (monogamous or non-monogamous) is 'hard-wired' from the start. However, the processes of our bodies and brains certainly operate together with the experiences we have through life and the messages we receive from the culture around us to shape the ways in which we experience love, desire, and so on.

How hard or misleading do you think it is to live with the view that boy meets girl, they fall in love, get married, remain faithful and live happily ever after?

I think that there is a problem when any one model of relationships gets presented as the ideal and/or only acceptable way of doing relationships. It would be just as much of a problem if the ideal was that everybody had to have five concurrent partners, or that relationships were only expected to last for two years, for example.

The reality is that different things work for different people at different times. There are a vast diversity of ways of doing relationships: serial monogamy, polygamy, hook-ups, friends with benefits, life-long relationships, celibacy, swinging, singledom, open relationships, polyamory, and relationship anarchy, to name just a few. And even within any of these examples, there are a myriad different ways of understanding and experiencing the relationships involved.

A one-size-fits-all model is damaging for anybody who doesn't fit and is therefore excluded, and often stigmatised and given fewer rights. It is also often damaging for those who do fit, but feel a massive pressure to ensure that their relationship meets the narrow range of expectations which are placed upon it. For example people often feel that they must meet every marker of a 'successful' relationships (living together, marriage, kids) at the 'appropriate' time, and believe that they have to demonstrate 'happily ever after' constantly, rather than being able to admit to

the inevitable tough parts of a long term relationship.

How much has our concept of marriage changed over time and how would you describe it now?

Marriage has changed a great deal over time. I'm not a historian myself, but Stephanie Coontz's book 'Marriage: A History' is very helpful on this. She explains how, in Western cultures, it is only in recent decades that marriage has become so much about romantic love. Previously it had much more to do with, for example, bringing families together and matters of economy, work and child-rearing.

Changes such as declining religion, unstable jobs, and the fact that people move around rather than staying in smaller communities have all meant that people look to romantic relationships to meet all of their needs in a way they never have before. Partners are often now expected to be best friends, passionate lovers, constant companions, support networks, sources of validation, co-parents, and carers-when-ill. And romantic love relationships are often viewed as being by far the most important relationship in our lives rather than one of many relationships.

I think this does put relationships under a lot of pressure. Many people – whether in monogamous or non-monogamous relationships – are looking for ways of managing things differently in this rather new situation that they find themselves in.

How acceptable do you think polyamory, negotiated infidelity etc are in the UK? Why do we shun these?

Things have certainly shifted in the last decade to the point that there is greater awareness and acceptance of various non-monogamous ways of doing relationships: whether openly (like polyamory) or more secretly (like negotiated infidelity). However, there is still no legal recognition of such relationships (indeed the very notion was ridiculed on all sides of the recent same-sex marriage debates) and there remains a good deal of stigma around both infidelity and forms of consensual non-monogamy.

In a time of uncertainty I think people often want to cling to the idea that there must be one true, natural, right, normal way of doing things, and that ensuring that everyone does things that way is the best way of keeping everyone safe. However, I think that actually the opposite is the case. Restricting people in this way is often very damaging to both those who fit the 'norm' and those who don't.

A model which appreciates that there are diverse ways of doing relationships, being sexual, expressing love, parenting, forming families, and so forth, is kinder and more flexible, and enables us to focus on things that really matter such as how to treat each other ethically and how best to communicate and support each other in all our relationships.

Monogamy isn't 'natural'

July 2013

This is a piece I published on the Guardian Comment is Free website in response to news about research on evolutionary theories of monogamy.

So monogamy works for some animals. Doesn't mean it's 'natural' for us

We cannot resist evolutionary research on monogamy but biology is only part of how humans connect

There has been a good deal of press coverage surrounding a research study that addressed the question of how human monogamy came about, from an evolutionary perspective. This suggested that males in monogamous mammal species remain with female partners to protect their families from other males, who would otherwise kill the young and mate with the females.

This is no doubt an interesting study, as is other recent evolutionary research highlighting how unusual monogamy is across animal species (reported in the book Sex at Dawn). However, more interesting to me is the focus of such research – and the journalists who report it. If we are genuinely interested in human monogamy, I wonder why our main focus is how it evolved in animals.

It seems that this reflects our current cultural preference for internal explanations of human behaviour. We seem drawn to neuroscience and evolutionary biology to address our questions, rather than to the social sciences or philosophy for example. Undoubtedly the ways in which humans evolved, and the ways in which our brains and bodies now function, are part of the picture of how we relate to one another. However, there are clearly many more contributing factors than that. We require a biopsychosocial approach, rather than one that engages with biology alone.

As a researcher I use a biopsychosocial approach to give a fuller picture of human relationships. As a therapist I also find such an approach useful in helping people to make sense of their relationships. People in the therapy room grapple with questions of how to maintain their freedom while in a relationship, how to form loving connections, and how to remain in relationships when they can be so painful. Here, it is helpful to have a sense of the diverse ways people can structure their relationships, and the common human dilemmas around freedom, belonging and craving the approval of others, which pervade such concerns.

In relation to social aspects, when we look back through time and across cultures, we see a diversity of relationships, structures and rules. More societies are polygamous than

monogamous, and the forms that polygamy takes vary greatly. In many seemingly monogamous societies, secret non-monogamy and/or serial monogamy are actually the norm.

The basis of western partner relationships has shifted over the past century from pragmatic and economic concerns to an overwhelming emphasis on romantic love. There have been related shifts in living arrangements from extended to nuclear families, and with increasing numbers of people living alone and not having children. Of course the recent extension of marriage to same-sex couples reflects another change which research on male/female relationships alone will struggle to inform. Increasing gender equality is a further shift which has a huge impact on how we now conduct relationships. The internet too raises new questions around what counts as sexual or emotional fidelity. With new technology there has been a proliferation of forms of open non-monogamy: hook-up culture, friends with benefits, monogamish relationships, polyamory, and relationship anarchy, to name but a few.

Turning to psychological elements, we find that people experience their relationships in a diversity of ways, even within one culture or community. Ask people their reasons for getting married, or swinging, or having an affair, and you will get a wide range of responses. For example, some openly non-monogamous people emphasise their individual freedom or hedonistic pleasure; some have political reasons to do with the patriarchal and capitalist history of monogamous marriage; some feel it is an inherent part of their being, akin to a sexual identity; some wish to connect with multiple people, to find a sense of belonging, or to avoid the risks inherent in pressurising one relationship to meet all of their needs.

We need to get beyond our cultural obsession with what is “natural” when it comes to human relationships, and the common assumption that this equates to what is “normal” and also to what is “good”. Instead we should turn our attention to the diversity of ways in which humans connect, and ask ethical questions about how we relate to each other in a world of ever-changing relationship rules.

Is infidelity good or bad for relationships?

August 2012

I was asked onto Sunday Morning Live (BBC1) this morning to discuss whether infidelity can be a good thing for relationships.

The question comes off the back of the publication of a couple of recent books which make the argument that affairs can be very positive experiences for those who have them, and that it is our cultural attitude about infidelity that is the problem, rather than infidelity itself.

Infidelity is good for relationships?

For example, in his latest book *How to Think More About Sex*, philosopher Alain de Botton argues that we must not underestimate how tempting and exhilarating affairs can be, nor how difficult it is to stay with one partner over our increasingly long life-spans. This is especially tough with all the (historically recent) pressure for genuine love and passionate sex to last through illness, children, conflicts, and all the other challenges that long term relationships face. Alain de Botton argues that:

spouses should not blame each other for occasional infidelities; instead they should feel proud that, for the most part, they have managed to remain committed to their union

He suggests that it takes immense patience and kindness not to sleep around and also not to end up hating one another.

In sociologist Catherine Hakim's latest book *The New Rules*, she argues that high rates of marital breakdown can be linked to puritanical approaches to infidelity. She suggests that internet dating and 'playfairs' (recreational sex) could actually be a path to happier relationships, and certainly should not inevitably lead to break-up.

But what about honesty?

There is a lot to commend the fact that de Botton and Hakim are questioning the taken-for-granted rules which people have applied to relationships, pointing out the historical and cultural shifts which have left us with the current attitudes we have towards infidelity: that it is a terribly thing and should inevitably result in the end of the relationship.

However I'm surprised, when reading extracts from these books, that both authors seem content to accept, as taken-for-granted, that people must get married and that any additional

relationship must take the form of a (sexual) affair. They question whether infidelity should always be viewed so negatively, but they don't seem to seriously question whether there might be other ways of doing relationships which offer alternatives to the marriage plus secret affairs model.

As I mentioned on the programme, my major concern about infidelity is not the sex outside marriage/relationship issue, but rather the deception, secrecy and dishonesty involved. Occasionally affairs can be 'good for relationships', making them stronger. But when this happens it is generally because the affair forces the couple to start communicating about what they want, perhaps respecting that they each have some needs that can't be met in a single relationship.

It seems to me that, rather than encouraging a more positive attitude to affairs, it would be better to encourage more open communication throughout the relationship, about all aspects of it.

Not just affairs

Such open communication would help because problems don't only arise in relation to obvious infidelities (sexual relationships with other people). Research has demonstrated that most people in monogamous relationships do not talk up front about what they mean by monogamy, and that there are often quite major differences in their assumptions, which can cause serious problems when they come to light. For example, one person might be very close to an ex partner, and the other might think this is not okay. Or one person may feel that cybersex is not 'real' sex, whilst their partner thinks that it definitely is. There may be disagreements also around flirty behaviour or close friendships.

Of course there are also many groups now who are explicitly negotiating the rules around monogamy in their relationships. For example, in swinging, open relationships, polyamory, and in the 'new monogamy' or 'monogamish' relationships (which are somewhat open to emotional or sexual connections with people beyond a main couple). Some of these relationships involve a couple who have other sexual or emotional relationships, and others involve people having multiple relationships which are not couple-based at all.

In my book, *Rewriting the Rules*, I suggest that, whatever style of relationship people choose, it is useful to have conversations about where they stand on continua of emotional monogamy (from only having one close person in their lives to many) and sexual monogamy (for only have one sexual partner to having many).

Of course such conversations don't stop people changing through their relationship, or making other connections which alter their feelings on these matters. The monogamy conversation (like

the sex conversation, and the ‘what we want out of life’ conversation, and many others) needs to be an ongoing conversation throughout all our relationships.

Non-monogamy

August 2014

I understand that there have been a couple of recent books (yours and Catherine Hakim´s) discussing the attitudes about infidelity in the UK? Do you think that is just a coincidence or is it a sign of the times?

It definitely feels like a current topic with many books and movies raising questions about the challenges of being in long term relationships and about how we deal with infidelity when it occurs.

Catherine Hakim's book looks at the recent trend of dating websites for people who are looking for lovers outside their marriage. My book explores all of the many ways in which people at the moment are rewriting the rules of their relationships.

I think that the 'rules' about infidelity are being questioned right now for a combination of reasons. First, as people live longer what is meant by a 'long term' relationship becomes potentially much longer than it was in previously. Secondly, people are now looking for a lot more from a partner or spouse than they might have done in the past. It is common for people to expect such relationships to remain romantic and sexual throughout as well as providing a close friendship, a sense of belonging and security, and personal validation. This can be a great deal of pressure to put on one person, and that is a big part of the reason why people often end up looking elsewhere and having infidelities.

Is it more difficult to be faithful to one partner today? If so – why?

The problem relates to a common tension in relationships. At the same time that we are looking for safety and companionship in a relationship, we are also all trying to reach our own goals in life and we value our independence.

This tension between belonging and freedom plays out in a number of ways in relationships. For example, we might find ourselves in serial monogamy where we search for a partner when we crave love and belonging, but break-up with them when we start feeling stifled and yearning for independence. Another way the tension plays out is in infidelities. These can meet our need to feel more free and to remind ourselves who we are without our partner, whilst retaining the relationship.

Another reason that it is difficult to be faithful is something that Esther Perel explores in her excellent book, *Mating in Captivity*. She says that we are looking for 'warmth' and 'heat' from the same relationship. We want to be secure and comfortable with a partner, perhaps building a family with them, at the same time as wanting to have a hot and exciting relationship. It is hard to get both these things from the same person, which might be another reason for people

seeking infidelities.

Is there a problem with our cultural attitude about infidelity? If so – what?

There is a problem because all of the pressure we culturally put on relationships makes it more likely that infidelity will happen but, at the same time, infidelities are very frowned upon in many countries and often seen as being a reason to break-up a relationship.

Catherine Hakim suggests that people in France are more relaxed about casual infidelities (or 'play-fairs') and that it is generally expected and accepted that married people will have sex with other people at some point. Other researchers like Lisa Wade have written about 'hook-up culture' in the US where college students have several more casual sexual relationships rather than having one main relationship and additional infidelities. It is useful to see that different groups and cultures have different ways of doing relationships because it opens up the possibility of doing things differently and finding our own ways forward.

Infidelity is sometimes being presented as a way of saving marriages or long relationships? Do you agree that having a secret affair, is good for the primary relationship?

The problem that I have with all of this is with the secret aspect of it all. Certainly there are cases when people have had affairs and it is good for the relationship long term, perhaps because it came out in the open and encouraged the people involved to communicate more. However, much more frequently if the affair is uncovered it causes a great deal of pain for everyone involved. The person having the affair is often blamed and feels terribly guilty, their partner frequently feels very hurt and betrayed, and the person who the affair was with may well end up losing somebody who they loved and had become very important in their life. It can also be very hard for friends and family who feel pressured to take sides.

What are the negative aspects of infidelity?

In the case of secret affairs which come out into the open there can be real damage to the sense of trust between the main partners because they realise that they have been lied to. Feelings of guilt and shame, betrayal and self-doubt, are also very common. It can also be very painful for the person who the affair was with, and for any children and other family members.
If the infidelity remains secret then there can be a lot of fear of being found out, as well as constraints on how the affair relationship can develop given that it has to remain hidden.

Many marriages end in divorce – what do you think are the most important reasons for that?

There are many reasons for the break-up of relationships – people changing in different

directions, recognition of incompatibilities, etc. – but I think that a big part of it is the pressure that relationships are under to provide so many of our needs. When we look for a 'perfect' partner and try to be a 'perfect' partner for somebody else, we are doomed to fail, and painful break-ups often follow from the recognition that we cannot be everything to each other.

Infidelity is often involved with this because people frequently look elsewhere when they feel that their partner isn't meeting all their needs any more, or when they realise that their partner has stopped seeing them as perfect.

A big part of the solution is to put less pressure on romantic relationships and to recognise all of the important relationships that we have in our lives (with friends, family, colleagues, and others, as well as with partners). Also if we can acknowledge that people and relationships change over time our relationships may be more flexible and able to shift, and we may feel less need to blame each other if we do go our separate ways.

Is there an alternative to the marriage plus secret affairs model?

My research has mostly focused upon open alternatives to secret affairs. Many people now are pursuing honest ways of having more than one sexual and/or romantic relationship. For example, the 'new monogamy' or 'monogamish relationship' involves having one main relationship but with openness to flirtations and friendships of various kinds outside of it. Open relationships and swinging involve having one romantic partner but many sexual partners. Polyamorous people have multiple romantic relationships in various different ways. People who are interested in relationship anarchy value the freedom of themselves and of their partners to make their own decisions in all of their relationships.

Most of these kinds of relationships emphasise ongoing trust and communication. There are an increasing number of books available about how to communicate about monogamy and other aspects of relationships. Readers who are interested might find it useful to read Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's book *The Ethical Slut* and Tristan Taormino's *Opening Up: A guide to creating and sustaining open relationships*.

Polyamory and Wonder Women

November 2017

Many thanks to Anna Smith for including me in this fab Guardian article about the awesome new movie *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women.*

Check out the article if you want to read more about polyamory, how it's been depicted in cinema, and why this most recent representation is one of the best. Here's my original interview with Anna so you can read more of my own thoughts…

How would you define polyamory, briefly?

Literally translated it means 'many loves' and it's the idea that it's possible – and often positive – to have more than one partner-style relationship at the same time. There are lots of different forms of polyamory, so it's worth seeing that as a broad umbrella term for lots of different kinds of open, or consensual, non-monogamy.

What did you think of Professor Marston and the Wonder Women?

I loved it. I thought it was a wonderful combination of being moving, thought-provoking, and really funny in places. I cried quite a lot all the way through it, so I'd suggest people take a hanky! It was also wonderful to see such a positive depiction of polyamory, and to know it is based on a real life story. Certainly the things the characters went through will be very familiar to polyamorous viewers.

How rare is it to see positive depictions of polyamory in the media?

It's very rare sadly. In fact if you think about it, very often the media do the exact opposite of putting polyamory across as a viable option. A person being in love with two people at once is a staple of much drama from romcoms and soap operas to advice columns and tabloid news headlines. Almost always the outcome is that they are forced to choose one person and to let go of the other. This reinforces the idea that the only normal, natural, or good way to have relationships is lifelong monogamy, which is a real shame because actually there are many different ways of doing relationships.

How do you feel polyamory is usually depicted in films?

In the media non-monogamy of any kind is generally depicted pretty poorly if it is portrayed at all – as something dangerous, weird, or doomed to failure. The most common depiction is of secret monogamy, or infidelity, which people are punished for – in films like *Fatal Attraction* or

Unfaithful. Sometimes open relationships are represented but they end in tragedy or difficulty, like in *The Ice Storm* or *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. There are a few more positive depictions of open non-monogamy in films like *Shortbus*, *Kinsey*, *Summer Lovers*, or – kindof – *Her*. *Big Love* and *You, Me, Her* are TV Shows that have explored these themes more positively – although in relation to fairly limited forms of polyamory.

How have attitudes changed over the decades (if at all)?

Definitely they are changing slowly. When I started studying this area fifteen years ago or so virtually all the reporting around polyamory was sensationalist and negative, saying it could never work, or it was 'taking all the fun out of affairs', or was bad for kids of polyamorous parents, for example. Now we have a wealth of research on just how common polyamory is (about 5% of people in the US are openly non-monogamous, for example), about the diversity of ways of doing relationships that are available, and about how positive polyamorous families can be for children. The media has latched on to some of this, like Elizabeth Sheff's column in Psychology Today, Esther Perel's popular TED talks and books, or Dan Savage's advice about monogamous, non-monogamous, and monogamish relationships. I find, nowadays, that my self-help writing about diverse relationship styles is reported much more positively than it used to be, for example open non-monogamy is often presented as a more consensual option than secret infidelity.

Do you think film has the influence to change perceptions of polyamory?

I hope so. Watching *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* I found myself thinking, 'how could anybody watching this fail to understand that loving two people at once is completely possible and can be extremely positive for all concerned?' The thing about fiction is that it encourages empathy with the characters, and so hopefully can reach people's hearts, while more evidence-based arguments can reach their minds. However I also found the film very sad because many of the battles they fought are still being fought today. The internalised shame that one of the characters feels is very familiar to therapists like me who work with polyamorous people. The accusations that they were damaging their kids is also still sadly common. And, of course, there is still no legal recognition of polyamorous relationships – indeed during the same-sex marriage campaigns both sides argued against extending marriage rights to more than two people. We've still got a long way to go.

Any other thoughts?

It's important to say that depicting polyamory is not about saying it's superior to monogamy, just that there are many different relationship styles, and that different things work for different people. It would be great if we could embrace relationship diversity instead of trying to force people into a one-size-fits-all model.

Conflict and Communication

Meta-Communication

November 2012

If we agree that communication is a good idea this begs the question of what is meant by communication. How do we actually go about communicating about our relationships with the people we are in relationships with? My book deals quite a lot with communication about points of conflict, and includes some suggestions regarding communication about sex, monogamy and commitment, but I thought that it was a topic worthy of further exploration here.

I've been at two workshops in the past month or so which have dealt with relationship communication in general, and with communication about sex in particular. At both of these I came across some useful ideas which I'll share in the next couple of posts.

Meta-Communication

The first workshop I attended focused on the idea of communication about communicating. This might sound a bit meta, and indeed one word for it is meta-communication.

Basically what it means is that people have different ways of communicating which they prefer, or which come more easily to them. Instead of launching into conversations with people in our lives, and then becoming frustrated or angry if they communicate in ways we find difficult, it might be worth starting with a conversation about how we're going to communicate.

Counsellors and therapists refer to this as a focus on 'process' rather than 'content'. When we're dealing with the process of communication we're talking about how we communicate. That means we can then go into the content of communication with an awareness of this. If the discussion of content becomes difficult it can often be useful to return to talking about the process, before getting back into it.

Of course this is applicable to all kinds of communication. For example, it can be useful to start a workshop or group discussion with a consideration of the kind of communication people would like

and what processes would be best to enable it. It might be worth putting some ground rules in place, or agreeing on some mechanism by which people will take turns in contributing like putting up hands, holding an object and passing it around, or nodding when they've finished talking. Agreement, disagreement, need for clarification and other things can also be expressed in various ways verbally or nonverbally.

The aim of communication

This brings us to consideration of the aim of the communication, which is vital. The style of communication that works best depends very much on what we are aiming for. For example, in a workshop or seminar, if we are aiming for as many diverse views as possible to be expressed, and for everyone to feel as safe as possible expressing them, then ground rules which cultivate a culture of openness and open up space for different contributions are a great idea. If we are aiming to reach a quick joint decision, or to have a feisty back-and-forth debate, then other modes of communication might work better.

So it can be useful to recognise that this is not about prioritising certain kinds of communication over others, but rather about a collaborative process of finding the best communication style for the people, and aims, which are present.

This is an important point because different ways of communicating are more or less comfortable or familiar depending on all kinds of aspects of people, such as their cultural or class background, age, generation, disability, sexuality, race, gender, and so on. For example, I've been in situations where people have felt excluded from conversation because norms against talking over each other, or against touching, gesticulating or raising voices, have been so different from the ones they are familiar with. There is also great diversity in things like how comfortable people are with silence or with expression of different emotions; how relevant they feel it is to tell personal stories or to use academic language; or what they understand by direct eye-contact or sitting close to somebody.

Those old 'mars and venus' style ideas about gender differences in preferred ways of talking (direct or indirect, listening or problem-solving, talking it out or retreating to think it through) are useful to consider in some ways. The problem with them is that we can't generalise as simply as 'men this and women that' because gender doesn't work in this way for many people, and because there are so many intersections between gender and other aspects of a person. Rather it is more useful for each person to consider all aspects of their identity and background, and how these have shaped their own preferred ways of communicating.

How we prefer to communicate

A great starting point for communicating about communicating is to consider how aspects of ourselves like culture, class, gender, age, generation, disability, sexuality, religion, experience, etc.

impact on how we tend to communicate. You might consider questions like:

- How did the people around you communicate when you were growing up? Who was included or excluded from interactions? What styles of verbal and non-verbal communicating did people use? Which ones were more or less approved of or successful? What did you like or dislike about this? Which aspects impact on your communication styles today?
- Are there any aspects of how your particular body and/or mind works which mean that certain ways of communicating are easier, or more difficult, for you?
- What expectations do you think there are on how people of your gender, race, class, age, body type, religion, cultural background, or sexuality communicate? Do any of these fit your preferred way of communicating? Do any of them not fit?
- Remember an interaction which you really didn't like and one you really did like, in recent weeks. What do the differences between these tell you about your preferred way of communicating?
- Do you have any hard limits (ways of communicating that you are absolutely not okay with somebody else using)? Do you have any strong preferences for ways in which you would like to communicate? Are there aspects you'd be willing to compromise on?

Suggestions that were put forward in the workshop I attended were also to consider whether we preferred to communicate:

- Straight away, or after having some time to think
- Verbally, in a written form (e.g. email, text, webchat) or some other way
- Face to face or not (e.g. internet, telephone, etc.)
- At particular times of day (e.g. not first thing in the morning, not last thing at night)

Relating to the last point a lot of people agreed that it was worth having your physical needs met (sleep, food, etc.) before embarking on an important conversation.

What are we aiming at?

During the workshop we came up with lots of different things which we might be aiming at when we communicate with another person. It can be very useful indeed to discuss what we are aiming at before getting into the conversation itself, given how many conflicts occur simply because people are looking for different things out of their interaction. Think, for example, about times when one person really wanted someone to listen and sympathise, whilst the other person assumed that they wanted advice. Or there are times when one person is just enjoying making a connection whilst the other person assumes that there needs to be some definite point or outcome to the conversation. Perhaps

one person really wants to get some practical support whilst the other person thinks it would be useful to just keep listening.

You might find it useful to add to the list below (from the workshop) of things we might be aiming for in communication. You could then think about which ones you are looking for (in general, from different kinds of interactions, or with different people). When you're about to communicate with somebody it could well be useful to compare notes on what you're looking for from the conversation and consider whether they are compatible. If they can say what they are hoping from you, you can then say whether that's something you have to offer or not (in general, or on this occasion).

- To make a connection
- To impart information
- To find out information
- To get support
- To problem solve
- To make a decision
- To persuade
- To discuss
- To get a response

Communicating love

One particularly loaded kind of communication is communicating our love for other people, and having that communicated to us. Something that I touch on in *Rewriting the Rules* is that people often have different ways in which they like to express their love, or to have it expressed to them. For example, if one person likes declarations of love and the other person thinks that it is best to show that they care by doing household tasks, then the first person might end up feeling very unloved despite all the others' efforts. I'm reminded of the line in the Billy Bragg song 'no amount of poetry could mend this broken heart, but you can put the hoover round if you want to make a start'.

Author Gary Chapman suggests that there are five 'love languages' or ways in which people like to express love and to have it expressed to them. These are:

- Words of affirmation
- Quality time or undivided attention
- Gifts
- Acts of service
- Physical touch

In the workshop we agreed that these were not static things that we had the same across all relationships, but that it could be useful to think, in each relationship we have, about:

- Which of these ways of expressing love do we prefer to receive? (there may be more than one, there may be additional ones for you)
- Which do we prefer to give?
- Which do we not like to give?
- Which do we not like to receive?
- In what specific ways do these work for us? (e.g. if we like words of affirmation, which words do we prefer, how frequently and in what form?)

As with communication in general it can also be helpful to think about the expressions of love that were, or were not, familiar to us growing up; associations with age, gender, race, class, etc.; and any things that are vital to us (e.g. not liking public displays of affection, wanting one text message a day minimum from a loved one, needing people to turn their phones off on a date, etc.)

Hopefully these suggestions have shown how useful it might be to engage in meta-communication (or communication about communication), not just when we have problems or conflicts, but much more generally in our everyday interactions.

If we can accept that there are many different ways of communicating, and approach each other with curiosity to find out what our preferences are, then we are in a better place to understand how our communication works. Perhaps we can make a habit of starting conversations by articulating what it is that we're looking for, and commit to shifting from content to process any time that things become tricky.

Find out more…

There's more on meta-communication and love languages in my book *The Secrets of Enduring Love*.

Heffalumps and Conflicts

January 2012

I was recently very flattered to be asked to write a guest post for the wonderful blog Treasury Islands, which is all about children's literature. The blog includes fascinating regular posts on the origins of various nursery rhymes and kids books, as well as critical reviews of current kid's books which resonate with many of my own concerns about gender, body image, etc. They kindly allowed me to include the post here as well, so here is my exploration of relationship conflict via the wisdom of Winnie-the-Pooh…

Trigger warning: discussion of relationship conflict and brief mention of abusive situations.

Tigger warning: not mentioned at all, sorry Tigger.

Some of my favourite stories from childhood were the Winnie-the-Poohcollections by A. A. Milne. Particularly I remember being read these tales by my Gran when she visited. They were an important part of our relationship.

I like the fact that different family relationships are linked, in my memory, to different stories. The stories both defined the storyteller, for me, and passed on something that shapes who I am today. My other Gran made up her own stories (rather like A. A. Milne did), whilst I associate my Mum with Beatrix Potter and my Dad with Sherlock Holmes. Both of these latter figures continued to resonate through my later life, Beatrix Potter through the wonderful Bryan Talbotgraphic novel about survival, The Tale of One Bad Rat, and Sherlock Holmes as the characters of Holmes and Watson provided models, for me, of what it was possible to become, and what was important in a relationship. I love seeing the ways in which these characters are reinterpreted through each new movie, story, or TV programme, all of which capture something of them however different they are. Winnie-the-Pooh, however, only seems to work for me in the original.

As a child I think I enjoyed Winnie-the-Pooh particularly because in those stories a solitary kid was able to have an exciting life and lots of great relationships. Whist the stories of Enid Blyton, for example, left me feeling lonely and different for not having a wonderful gang of friends to go off on adventures with, Christopher Robin (in the books at least) was able to manage it for himself with his toys and his imagination. Perhaps for that reason they are a good set of stories for any kid who doesn't fit.

The stories haven't stopped being useful to me as I've grown older. Rather they've stayed alongside me, offering me something new at each stage. With several partners the tales have been a comforting mutual place to return when life becomes scary. There can hardly be a safer

place for me than curled up under a duvet with a soothing voice telling about the hundred acre wood, haycorns, and expotitions.

But, as many writers have recognised, Winnie-the-Pooh is a lot more than a collection of sweet and funny stories. In their simple way, the tales have as much of importance to say about people and their relationships than some of the great works of philosophy, and in a way that is accessible to any age. Hence, several authors have used the stories as ways into explaining western philosophy,psychology, taoism, and a number of other topics.

The characters in A. A. Milne's stories continue to appeal because they are so recognisable. We can all think of people who rush around as busily as Rabbit or who overintellectualise to hide their ignorance like Owl. As a psychologist I'm not keen on the idea that the different characters represent different personality types, or even pathologies (as suggested in Pooh and the Psychologists). Rather I think most of us can recognise, in ourselves, the capacity for Roo-ish enthusiasm, Piglet-ish anxiety, and Eeyore-ish gloom ("We can't all and some of us don't. That's all there is to it."). Perhaps there's a value to cultivating the characters who come least easily to us – something that psychotherapistsAndrew Samuels suggests (if not explicitly in relation to Winnie-the Pooh).

But this is not what I find most useful about the stories today. For me, by far the most helpful thing in the books is what they have to say about our relationships with each other. And the stories that best capture this are the ones which I loved most as a child: the stories about heffalumps and woozles.

Heffalumps and Woozles are the two scary creatures in the Winnie-the-Pooh stories, suspected of being fierce (perhaps, like Kangas, particularly during the Winter months and towards smaller animals). In the first Heffalump story, Pooh and Piglet determine to catch a Heffalump by digging a deep pit and luring it in with a jar of honey. In the Woozle story, Piglet joins Pooh in tracking a Woozle by following its footprints in the snow.

The important thing about these stories is that Pooh and Piglet never meet either a Heffalump or a Woozle. In the Heffalump story Piglet is sure that he has. He returns to the pit they have dug in the early hours of the morning and there is a terrifying animal in there bumping around and making loud roaring noises. He runs off to Christopher Robin crying out "Help, help, a Herrible Hoffalump! Hoff, Hoff, a Hellible Horralump! Holl, Holl, a Hoffable Hellerump!'. In the Woozle story, Pooh and Piglet soon find that the Woozle they are tracking is joined by further Woozles (or, perhaps, Wizzles), and Piglet suddenly has to run off to do something that he forgot to do yesterday and shan't be able to do tomorrow.

But when Christopher Robin and Piglet return to the Heffalump trap they discover that the creature in there is just Pooh who, becoming hungry in the night, came along early to lick the honey out of the bottom of the jar and got it stuck on his head. All the roaring is just him trying to

free himself. In the Woozle story, sitting on a branch above them Christopher Robin observes that Pooh and Piglet have been walking around a spinney following their own footprints.

What has this got to do with relationships?

What I notice is that, when I find myself in a bad conflict with a partner, friend or family member, I am often convinced that they have turned into a monster. Instead of the loving person I am familiar with, they have been replaced, in my mind, by a fierce, roaring terror. They say things that sound cruel and uncaring and they don't seem to be fond of Megs at all. All I want to do is to run away.

At other times of conflict I find myself stuck in a horrible conversation that I don't want to be part of. I look at myself through the other person's eyes and don't like what they are seeing: it seems monstrous, not the cuddly, gentle person I like to think of myself as being. I struggle desperately to extricate myself from the situation but only seem to become more trapped. Eventually I find myself making noises of Sadness and Despair.

I think the Winnie-the-Pooh stories have something important to say about everyday relationship conflicts. If we look closer at the situation we may find that the monsters we have been fearfully tracking are actually ourselves. The person who seems to have suddenly become a horror is somebody we love who has got stuck in a trap (often of their own making). Or our own pain is being heard as a threat by somebody else and we are scaring them away when we really want them to help.

This is not to say that we should stay in situations which are actually dangerous. Piglet's strategy of running to safety can be a very sensible one both to keep us unharmed and to buy some time for the conflict to cool down. I'm not talking here about abusive relationships where, despite the light that empathy might shed on the pain of the abusive person, it is still not a good idea to remain in close proximity to them.

But in other kinds of conflict, which are so common in our relationships with those around us, it is worth remembering that there is likely a Christopher-Robin perspective on the situation whereby somebody disconnected could see how we have bounced off each other to escalate an argument to the point where we are seeing monsters. If we can see that we have been following ourselves round and round perhaps we can stand still for a moment. And if we can hear the despair in the frightening roaring noise our friend is making, perhaps we can help them to get the jar off their head.

Collaborative approaches to relationship conflict

July 2014

Yesterday I ran some training on relationship therapy for counsellors which involved exploring various different approaches and techniques. I was reminded of a chapter that I've found particularly helpful in this area, which I gave out to the students. Re-reading the chapter I realised that it says something a lot more profound than I originally realised. I thought it would be useful to summarise it here and draw out some implications: both for intimate relationship difficulties and more for conflict more widely.

Collaborative relationship therapy

The approach is the 'collaborative couple therapy' of Daniel B. Wile, a US therapist. You can read all about it on Dan's website here. Personally I prefer the term 'relationship therapy' to 'couple therapy' as it recognises that not all relationships are couple relationships.

Dan's first idea is that the aim, in relationship therapy, should be to 'solve the moment, not the problem'. This takes the pressure off trying to fix the whole – often seemingly overwhelming – difficulty that people are having. Instead, the emphasis is placed on addressing each interaction that comes up as something that can be 'solved', or engaged with more helpfully. Dan shares my view that conflict isn't a problem in relationships: it is inevitable, and it can be helpful depending on how we engage with it.

Practising this 'solving the moment' approach again and again means that another way of addressing issues becomes more and more available to the people in the relationship. They will also come to understand each other better in ways that will no doubt be helpful in addressing whatever they are struggling with.

The 'moment' is solved in the following ways:

- The therapist regains *empathy*
- The relationship regains *connection*
- The individuals in the relationship regain their *voices*

Dan's idea is that, when we have a conflict, we generally do not voice our real feelings about the matter. These often feel too vulnerable and exposing to express; and perhaps they are too difficult to identify in the heat of the moment; and we have deeply embedded habits which lead us to respond in ways other than opening up.

Instead we retreat to fallback measures which save us from voicing our feelings. The two most common are *blame* and *withdrawal*. Either we lash out and attack the other person for causing the problem, or we withdraw into ourselves and close off. Dan lists a further fallback measure where people *rush to fix* the situation in ways that don't address the feelings involved.

So, for example, if we're having an argument with a partner or housemate about who does the washing up, our underlying feeling might be of being taken for granted and devalued each time they ignore the pile of washing up: maybe they really don't care about us. However, rather than voicing this we are likely either to blame them (lashing out at them for being lazy), to withdraw (retreating from the painful conversation and just not saying anything in future despite being upset about it), and/or rush to fix (apologising for arguing with them and suggesting we watch a movie together or something). Similarly they may well not voice the feeling they have of guilt and embarrassment at being called on their, rather entitled, behaviour. Instead they respond with blame (attacking us for making a big deal out of something so trivial), withdrawal (going quiet or leaving the room), and/or rushing to fix (giving us a bunch of flowers the next day).

In these ways we tend to get into *adversarial cycles* (where we blame each other, and this escalates), or *withdrawn cycles* (where we avoid conflicts and resentment festers). Dan's idea is to shift such cycles into *collaborative cycles* through enabling people to recover from fallback measures and voice their real feelings: confiding in each other.

This is the point at which I think it gets profound. Dan notices that, as a therapist, his empathy for one or other person tends to drop when they retreat into fallback measures. At the moment when somebody starts blaming, going quiet, or trying to placate their partner, for example, he often finds himself judging them for how stupid or unhelpful they're being. His experience as a relationship therapist has taught him that it is in those very moments that he needs to find his empathy for that person – by recognising that they are falling back on those measures in order to defend their vulnerability. His method then is to go alongside the partner for whom he has lost empathy and to voice his hunch about what their real feeling might be, to help them to voice it themselves.

Once such feelings are voiced, the other person often softens and as able to connect with them better, and perhaps to voice their own feelings. However, as we all know, the exchange easily drops back into fallback measures of blame or withdrawal. This is where Dan returns to the idea of 'solving the moment'. One moment has been solved, now we're onto the next moment and a new challenge to solve.

Implications

For me there is so much of use in this approach, not only as a therapist but in my own conflicts in all kinds of relationships, and in the wider conflicts that often bubble up in groups or communities.

First the idea of aiming to ‘solve the moment’ rather than ‘solving the problem’ is useful. We can get so tangled up and overwhelmed by all of the history and complexity in play when we conflict, especially with people or groups which we have had long relationships with. The idea that each moment ‘solved’ has cultivated our capacity to engage with each other a little more helpfully next time is a good way of taking the pressure off. Also I like the redefining of the word ‘solved’ as meaning finding a connection and hearing each other, rather than resolving our differences or getting rid of the conflict. That seems a lot more respectful of the inevitable differences and tensions that exist between people and groups.

Secondly, the idea that we fall back into patterns of blame and/or withdrawal when we feel vulnerable resonates with me. So many times a day I notice that I start to become bothered and my reflex reaction is to find someone or something to pin it on, or to find ways to avoid the difficult feelings (for example, by trying to distract myself or by rushing to some kind of quick fix). Dan’s approach reminds me of how useful it can be to notice those patterns kicking in and, instead, to try to stay with the difficult feeling. I can aim to refrain from acting, or withdrawing, until I have a better understanding, and then to try to voice that understanding (to myself and/or to others concerned). Obviously this is extremely difficult and we are likely to fall back into habitual measures time and time again, but we can try not to beat ourselves up for this, and to regard each time that we manage the different approach as cultivating it in a way which will make it slightly easier the next time.

Finally, Dan’s approach alerts me to the possibility that the very moments when I find it hardest to empathise with others are the very moments in which empathy is most required, and most helpful. When somebody attacks me, or withdraws from me, I generally want to blame them or to withdraw from them myself. And such responses are easy because I have good justification. Everyone agrees with me that the other person was out of line, so I am supported in lashing out or complaining about them, or in deciding to cease engaging with somebody so painful, or in trying to insist on that the situation which is hurting me so badly gets fixed immediately.

But all those responses exacerbate the situation, hurting both me and them in the process. As Dan so wisely puts it ‘if you can’t turn your partner into an ally, you are stuck with turning your partner into an enemy or a stranger’. The approaches of blame and withdrawal just leave us – and them – with more and more enemies and strangers in our lives.

So perhaps – again probably only occasionally at first – we can start to notice those moments when somebody attacks us or withdraws from us as moments requiring of empathy, assuming that it has tapped into something so vulnerable for that person that they’ve had to reach for a fallback measure. Dan repeats the famous quote from Philo of Alexandria here: ‘be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle’.

Instead of rushing to defend ourselves, perhaps we can attempt to at least imagine what might have been triggered in the other person, using our own desire to defend, withdraw, or fix, as a way into connecting with them rather than disconnecting. Again the aim here is not to smooth

over conflict, to deny difference, or to get rid of difficult feelings that may be present. Rather it is to ‘solve the moment’ by turning it into a moment of potential connection and empathy where we have voiced our own vulnerability, and have opened up space – if possible – for the other to voice their’s (if they are in a place where it is possible for them to do so).

Disagreeing

Based on this podcast with Justin Hancock:
megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/disagreeing-with-people

There's a difference between challenging someone and disagreeing with someone. Challenging is when someone says that something that is harmful, offensive, or makes other people feel less safe. Disagreement is when people have different opinions, views, or values which don't have a directly harmful impact in the current situation (although whether they are harmful more widely may be part of the disagreement).

Challenging and disagreeing need dealing with differently. The distinction is related to the one between abuse and conflict. Abuse involves some degree of using power over someone to cause harm, whereas conflict is a more equal disagreement, although there is probably a spectrum of situations which fall somewhere between the two. It's useful to start by discerning between the challenging and disagreeing, and clarifying which situation you're in.

If someone is being prejudicial, oppressing you, or making you unsafe it isn't on you to do the work. You can just leave, or ask someone else to do the work.

While challenging occurs in situations where someone's behaviour is not okay, disagreements are okay - and inevitable. Conflict intimacy is the kind of intimacy we build by being able to have disagreements with people while still valuing them - and ourselves - rather than falling into blame or shame.

Ideally in disagreements it's great if we can be curious and empathetic towards the other person - really listening to what they're saying - not immediately building our own argument.

As with sex it's useful to move from a goal-focused to a process-focused approach. If we enter disagreements in order to win then we probably won't learn much, and we may well cause some harm to the other person or our relationship. If we can enter into it in order to learn and build intimacy, and with an openness towards the other person and where they're coming from, it's likely to go better for everyone, and probably the other person will be more able to hear our position than if we're trying to win.

Before getting too far into a disagreement it's good to ask yourself whether you - and the other person - are disagreeing in good or bad faith. It's generally not worth engaging if someone is disagreeing in order to: hurt you, big themselves up, win, belittle you, or play 'devil's advocate'. It's good to be boundaried about not getting into bad faith disagreements. Perhaps we can learn to tune into the feelings we have when somebody else - or ourselves - is slipping into bad faith.

It's also great to talk in advance about groundrules, having a meta conversation about how people like to disagree. For example if one person enjoys a heated debate, but the other hates them, perhaps it's worth avoiding getting into that kind of conversation - or agreeing on a different way to do them.

It's also worth checking the intensity of topic for the different people involved. If one person is very emotionally invested, whereas it's a fun hypothetical for the other person, that can also cause issues.

Any time a disagreement feels tough for anyone it can be good to shift from content to process: What's happening here? What's the dynamic? How is everyone feeling?

Finally it's good to ask whether we know enough up front. Who actually has the most knowledge here? If you actually know way less on a topic than the other person, then perhaps education is more useful than disagreement - be up for learning from them or going away and learning yourself before getting into it. Similarly you might be boundaried around not getting into disagreements with people where they don't acknowledge that you have way more expertise than they do on something.

Disagreements are not necessarily about finding the middle ground. It's worth remembering that there are various possible outcomes: One may move towards the other (in either direction), you may find a middle ground or compromise position, you may agree to differ, it may be an ongoing tension return to, and you may decide the relationship needs to end or change, for example if there is a big value difference.

Non-binary thinking is useful here, moving beyond a win/lose binary and towards open curiosity. Are we informing each other and learning about each others' positions? Social psychologist Kenneth Gergen recommended asking the following questions in situations of major disagreement? What do we have in common (in other areas than this)? Where are we coming from - what does this issue mean to us personally? What are our areas of doubt and uncertainty on this topic?

If it doesn't feel safe enough to have this particular disagreement it can be good to decide just not to engage on this topic between you, or to bring in a structure for the disagreement (e.g. giving each person 5-10 minutes to talk about it and just be listened to by the other, with an agreed process for reflecting back), or to bring in somebody to hold the space and/or mediate/facilitate.

Kindness

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020: megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/kindness

The jumping off point for this post was these two quotes.

Kate Bornstein: 'Your dreams are not dangerous. Your desires are not damned. Do whatever it takes to make your life more worth living. Anything at all. There's only one rule to follow to make that kind of blanket permission work. Don't. Be. Mean.'

Michael Brooks: 'Be ruthless against institutions but be kind and forgiving towards individuals.'

What does being kind - or not being kind - mean? What does it actually look like in practice? How can we be kind with individuals while being ruthless with unkind systems?

Why now?

We see starkly the degree of meanness and cruelty in our wider world right now: the hatred and fear of difference, the desire to keep safe by policing and building walls against the most marginalised people - excluding them or imprisoning them. The pandemic and the #BlackLivesMatter uprising have both shocked people into greater awareness of all of our complicity in the current state: our histories steeped in colonisation, genocide, slavery, and exploitation, and the long shadows these cast over our current situation.

The question becomes ever more urgent of how we can find kindness for each other in our own communities, networks, and close relationships. This could provide some buffer against a wider world which feels mean and cruel. If we can find some different ways of being we might be able to invite others into this, or offer it outwards: another way of being where one person's safety and comfort doesn't rely on another person's pain and alienation. Where people of all bodies, lives and labours can really be equally valued.

Kindness as praxis

Capitalist systems - particularly neoliberal capitalism rather than social democratic capitalism - are built on the idea that humans are fundamentally unkind and need regulation. The philosopher Hobbes's model of the Leviathan was the idea that humans needed a monster to keep them behaving well. This is echoed in the popular book *Lord of the Flies*.

This can be juxtaposed with Rousseau's idea that humans are fundamentally decent, cooperative, and friendly. Rutger Bregman's recent book *Humankind* considers the evidence to support this idea that humans have capacity for kindness and it is the systems we're in which make it very hard for us to be kind with ourselves and others. One part of the book involves

finding the 'real' Lord of the Flies and noting that the shipwrecked boys actually developed practices and systems of kindness.

To act kindly and expect kindness in return (even if we don't get it) is radical. It's anti-capitalist. As philosophies from Buddhism to intersectional feminism have emphasised, kindness is essential because we're fundamentally all interconnected.

Niceness or kindness?

Kindness can't just be a veneer of 'niceness' or 'harmony' which covers over people's pain, fear and rage, tone-policing all the difficult feelings away.

We might distinguish between niceness and kindness. Niceness responses often come from wanting to appear kind, but may not actually involve acting in the kindest way in a situation.

Author of *Fucking Law*, Victoria Brooks, talks about how real kindness requires work and effort. She distinguishes between talk about ethics (in research, law, medicine, etc.) which is often really about avoiding complaints or protecting ourselves or our institutions, and real ethics which is about asking what's best or kindest for everyone involved.

Sarah Ahmed talks about how institutions often hire an individual - or bring in a trainer - to address diversity or sexual harassment as a way of looking like they are tackling racism or sexual violence, but actually leaving the systems and structures which enable those unaddressed.

Niceness could be seen as something like these examples: the veneer of kindness which actually enables cruelty to continue - on whatever level. For example, 'nice' sex and relationships advice imagines we could tweak our current way of doing sex and relationship to be kinder, more consensual, and better for people. 'Kind' sex and relationships advice - in our view - recognises the impossibility of kind, consensual, fulfilling sex and relationship under the current - normative - cultural system, and endeavours to offer alternatives to that system and its way of doing sex and relationships.

The conditions for kindness

Kindness is very hard under social conditions which demand the opposite: where we're pitched against each other in competition for assumed-scarce resource, and where we're encouraged to constantly judge and police ourselves and each other critically.

Neurobiologically under such unkind systems (in the wider world, our institutions, our families, etc.) our bodies are likely to be constantly braced and reactive in ways which make it impossible to be socially engaged and therefore to be kind. All forms of trauma and stress impact our nervous systems in ways which take us out of our parasympathetic nervous system (relaxed,

socially engaged, capable of kindness) and into our sympathetic nervous system (e.g. into fight, flight or freeze responses). You can read more about this here and here.

So it's useful to tune into the conditions under which we can and can't be kind, and endeavour to foster the conditions - externally and internally - where kindness is possible, rather than beating ourselves up for struggling to be kind.

This is also why it is useful to understand the conditions that lead others to extreme cruelty. Crucially though this does not mean being 'nice' to those who behave cruelly, or allowing abuse and oppression to continue because we can understand the systems and intergenerational traumas that lead to those things. Understanding is kindness whilst also being forceful, challenging, and boundaried.

Dividing the cruel and the kind

Kindness can't work by figuring out who the 'baddies' and 'goodies' are and eradicating the baddies from our communities. That process individualises problems into single 'bad actors' instead of recognising that they're in the whole culture around us. It echoes the wider cultural system of policing, judging and incarcerating individuals, and of public shaming of anybody who deemed different or abnormal.

It also fails to recognise that we are all imperfect complex people capable of both harming and helping others, and that - as Laverne Cox and adrienne maree brown say - we all need to face the oppressor inside ourselves and what they are capable of.

We need to ask of models of justice which rely on individuals being called out and punished whether they work, whether they improve lives, and where they come from in the first place. It's also important to ask whether they enable or invite people to come together to fight for justice in solidarity, or whether they divide people and communities. There's some useful material on transformative justice models and accountability in the Barnard Centre for Research on Women YouTube Channel.

Who is asked to be kind?

Why is it that it's often the most vulnerable, marginalised, or unheard who are asked to be kind? Is there an expectation that if you have experienced oppression, or if you are empathetic or compassionate to oppressed people, that you are in some way 'meant' to be kind?

Asking people to be kind puts them in a disempowered double bind because kindness is read as being 'a pushover'. But those being asked to be kind are often exhausted and hopeless because of unkindness of power. So we limit kindness to who we know, which diminishes us all.

How can we act kindly in ways that empower more of us to do more kindness? How can we ensure that the most privileged shoulder the burden of the emotional labour of kindness, rather than those who are so frequently attacked?

Kindness and honesty

It's important to balance and work on our capacity for both kindness and honesty. Kindness without honesty isn't kind and honesty without kindness isn't honest.

Those who most pride ourselves on being kind often really aren't being. If we aren't being honest with ourselves and others it is often more like people pleasing, appointing ourselves as rescuers or saviours, overstretching ourselves and then letting people down, burning out, or disempowering or confusing people when protecting them from important information. Aiming to be kind rather than honest often ends up being unkind. Real kindness requires us to be honest with both ourselves and others, even if that is painful and hard at times.

Those who most pride ourselves on being honest truth-tellers often really aren't being, if it isn't tempered with kindness. We're often coming from a sense of self-righteousness, not seeing the whole person in front of us, acknowledging the capacity for similar behaviours in ourselves, or considering the potential impact of our honesty to make things worse for everyone, not better. Honesty, without the kind recognition that we are all suffering and defending ourselves against suffering, is not really honesty.

Kindness and rage

Related to honesty, we need to cultivate kindness along with the capacity for anger, in order to have our boundaries and be motivated towards justice. It can be interesting and useful to ask what kind rage, or angry compassion, might look like.

In his book *Love and Rage*, Lama Rod Owens 'Love and Rage' talks about the danger of turning anger inwards (unkindly) if it is too dangerous to turn it outwards, for example in his experience as a black person who is expected to remain kind to white people at all times, and to take on their pain. He says that anger points to real woundedness which needs kindness and love/ To look at what anger is pointing to requires loving rage.

Buddhists like Owens, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Pema Chödrön have all written about the importance of relating kindly with our anger rather than repressing it, reacting out of it, or allowing it to harden us.

Being kind

Here are some key takeaways around being kind:

- Kindness for self and others are equally vital: we need to hold onto the fact that we - and the other person/people involved - are equally valuable.

- Befriending all sides of ourselves is important. We have to be kind inwards in order to be kind outwards. This is a major job within an unkind culture and involves being prepared to keep doing our work, and cultivating kind and supportive networks to help us in it.
- It's important to balance kindness with honesty and boundaries, to aim for both connection and protection.
- Refraining is important when we don't feel able to be kind in a situation - rather than repressing our feelings or reacting out them. When we can't be kind we can wait till we can be, and/or enlist others who can be kind instead of us engaging. It's kinder to ourselves and others to recognise when kindness is not something we can do: we may not have enough energy or resources, or be strong enough for some of the possible outcomes, or clear enough to know our motivations.
- We can usefully situate the problem in the wider culture, systems and structures, rather than individualising it in a single person or type of person.
- Creative engagement is important. There can be no certainty when we're asking 'what is the kind thing to do', rather than the 'right' thing to do, but it is probably a more useful question.
- It's helpful to notice the situations in which we are, and aren't, able to be kind and work on expanding that capacity, whether with internal and/or external work and/or co-creating relationship containers and communities in which it's more possible for us to be kind.

Kindness and honesty

September 2013

I've blogged before on the tension between kindness and honesty: how, often, when we try to communicate honestly we sacrifice kindness, and when we try to be kind to others we sacrifice honesty. I concluded that it was important to find a balance between the two: holding that tension whenever we communicate with others, or indeed ourselves.

Lately, however, it seems to me that kindness and honesty are more inextricably linked than I previously thought. It struck me that kindness without honesty is not really kindness, and that honesty without kindness is not really honesty. So whether we are somebody who – in life – prides ourselves on our openness and straightforwardness, or on our compassion and generosity, we have to engage seriously with the other aspect in order to be truly as we are aiming to be (honest, or kind, respectively).

Kindness without honesty is not kindness

The first one is, perhaps, the easier to explain. If we are keen to be good for the people in our lives, and if we strive not to harm anybody, we may find ourselves sacrificing honesty for kindness. We pick up on what people around us seem to want from us and try to provide that for them, whether or not it fits with us.

So, for example, we might take on more work than we can comfortably manage in order to help others, claiming that we're fine. We might say that we feel more for somebody than we actually do in order to make them feel good. In a conflict we might lie about what we find difficult about somebody in order to save them pain.

These are all examples of kindness without honesty, and they all frequently backfire.

Working too hard without taking time to look after ourselves often results in us working less well and/or eventually having to stop suddenly because we simply can't keep it up. Such a situation is usually worse for the people around us than if we had been honest about the load we could reasonably commit to in the first place, or if we had said as soon as it was becoming difficult.

Similarly if we offer too much to people in our lives and then don't follow through on that, they are left confused and hurt. If we keep trying to give what we have offered (in terms of time, emotion, or commitment) even when we don't really have it, people generally pick up on this, or we end up so resentful that we pull away from them completely.

Finally, if we are never honest about our experience of other people because we want to save their feelings, we prevent them from learning things that may help them in the long term. Or perhaps we ensure that – when somebody does tell them – it is in a less supportive and helpful way which may be too painful for them to be able to hear.

So aiming to be kind *rather than* honest often ends up being unkind. Real kindness requires us to be honest with both ourselves and others, even if that is painful and hard.

Honesty without kindness is not honesty

This one is a little more difficult to explain and I am still working it through it myself. I think that if we are honest with somebody without thinking compassionately about that person than we are not being fully honest with ourselves, or with them.

So, for example, we might honestly tell somebody who we are struggling with that they are stupid, or lazy, or annoying. But it is not really honesty if we only see part of the picture and fix that as the truth. Full honesty involves seeing the way the person is being, but also having the imagination to understand the reasons why that might be the case. It also involves honestly looking at our own behaviour and how what has happened emerges from the exchange between us rather than being a matter of isolated individuals who could have internal characteristics such as stupidity, laziness, or annoyingness. Finally, full honesty requires us to see the whole person, rather than only the part of them that we are currently focusing on.

Bringing honesty together with kindness helps us to do all these things. Kindness encourages us to ask ‘what might be going on for this person that they are behaving like this?’, starting from the assumption that it makes sense rather than seeing them just from the self-centred point of view of our own desires and how they are blocking these. Kindness to ourselves enables us to look honestly at what we bring to the situation, without being overwhelmed by guilt and shame when we realise that we are also being imperfect people and contributing to conflict, confusion and pain. Finally, kindness opens us up to other aspects of the person – particularly the ones that are impressive – when our attention is in danger of being fixed on ‘negative aspects’. It allows us to see that what we are finding difficult may well be inextricably connected to things that we find valuable about this person (stubbornness and being committed, for example, or flakiness and being easygoing).

Honesty plus kindness helps us to see more clearly – indeed honestly – the vulnerability which we all share which underlies much of our behaviour. Then, instead of moments of conflict making us feel disconnected, isolated and alienated, they actually have the potential to connect us more fundamentally, as we recognise the familiar fears and dreads, hopes and desires, that drives the very behaviours that we are finding so difficult. But we need at least a little kindness to cut through the sense that we are up against a bad, blameworthy, inexplicable individual who is just getting in our way.

Honesty, without the kind recognition that we are all suffering and defending ourselves against suffering, is not really honesty.

Staying with feelings in relationships

Based on this podcast with Justin Hancock:
megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/staying-with-feelings-in-relationships

Generally if we can stay with feelings - or ourselves or another person - those feelings can be experienced and expressed and move through us. If we can't stay with feelings then we often layer more feelings on top of the existing feelings as we try to eradicate or repress them, e.g. guilt about feeling sad, then worry about feeling guilty, then frustration about how anxious we feel. Trying to deny or get away from tough feelings often leads to way more tough feelings.

The basic idea to come back to is that all feelings are sensible and rational. It's vital to let them be experienced.

Perhaps level 1 staying with feelings is staying with our own strong or difficult feelings, level 2 is staying with those feelings of somebody else when they're upset about something unrelated to us, and level 3 is staying with the feelings of somebody else when they're upset about something we've done ourselves.

So imagining a scenarios where a friend or partner has strong feelings: what do we do?

Why is it hard to stay with their tough feelings?
- If their strong feelings are about us we can feel responsible for them and not want the strong feelings that invokes in us (e.g. guilt/shame)
- We may feel enmeshed or entwined with that person and want them to feel the same way we would in that situation, or struggle with the fact their feelings reveal that their values aren't the same as ours
- We're generally not comfortable around 'negative feelings' in our culture and want to fix or eradicate them so that everyone is feeling - or at least pretending to feel - happy

How can we stay with their tough feelings?
- Park the issue (if there is one between us) and focus on the feeling. Let them fully express it without trying to allocate blame onto us or to them
- Be on their side and really listen to what they have to say. Don't think about how we might feel in that situation, but recognise that this is how *they* feel (with their life experiences and world view)
- Know when we have this to offer and when we don't. For example, if we're triggered too or too tired. Don't try to do it then but make time when do have it to offer.

Other People's Feelings

July 2013

Something that has been a live issue for me recently – both in my own life and in conversations with friends – is how we relate other people's feelings.

It seems like many of us have a default way of relating in which we feel responsible for how other people feel. A major alternative to this that has been put forward is the idea of 'owning' our emotions. This is the notion that people are only responsible for what they, themselves, feel.

I'm going to argue that both of these ways of seeing the situation are limited. An alternative would be to practice being with our own feelings and those of others (without trying to deny, avoid or escape them, or taking all the responsibility for them). This involves recognising that we are not completely separate selves, but rather that we are intrinsically connected with others.

'You made me feel…'

It seems that a common taken-for-granted way of understanding feelings is that we cause other people to feel things and that we should take complete responsibility for this. People often say 'you made me feel angry/scared/good/happy, etc.' and we rarely question the truth of this.

A common extension of this is that if somebody expresses a feeling in relation to something that we are involved with we feel entirely responsible for them having that feeling. Given that we tend, also, to divide feelings into purely positive and purely negative emotions we may then approach the world in a way which attempts to create only positive feelings in others and no negative feelings. We may feel wonderful if those around us are happy (to the extent that we put pressure on them to be so) and distraught if they are not.

Owning our emotions

Perhaps in response to the problems with this common way of viewing other people's feelings, several authors on topics like assertiveness, relationships and conflict management put forward the alternative approach that we are not at all responsible for other people's emotions. The idea of owning our emotions suggests that nobody makes us feel anything except ourselves. We can choose how to make sense of other people's behaviours, and thus we are in control of any emotional response we have: it belongs to us. An extension of this idea is that we would certainly reject any accusation that we had made anybody feel anything.

I am cautious about this because it feels like a pendulum swing to the other extreme: from the idea that we are entirely responsible for other people's feelings to the idea that we are not responsible at all.

Either completely responsible or not at all?

There are two problems that I have with this either/or approach: one theoretical and one more pragmatic.

The theoretical point is that both ways of seeing things seem to treat people as if they are entirely separate selves. Feeling responsible for others' feelings treats people as if we were isolated billiard balls, bashing up against each other and causing effects when we do so. Owning our emotions suggests that we are entirely separate individuals and capable of determining our own feelings regardless of what happens in the world around us.

My view is that we are actually all interconnected and interrelated. I notice that I am quite a different 'self' in different relationships (outgoing and jokey with my sister, reflective and serious with my friend). We draw different selves out of each other and, in this way, we are constantly engaged in a mutual process of opening up each other's possibilities – or limiting and constraining them – in all kinds of ways. Such an approach rejects the idea that we are a separate self that can be entirely responsible for anything, and also that we are separable in such a way that we could have no influence on others.

The pragmatic point is that neither of the two approaches that I outlined before are very useful. When we subscribe to the 'making people feel things' view we often become overwhelmed with self-blame and guilt when somebody expresses displeasure with something that we have done, or even when they just express unhappiness in our presence. A great analogy that I have heard for this is that of going to a friend's house and breaking their favourite vase. If we then become deeply and visibly distressed about what we've done, the other person may end up comforting us and pushing aside their own feelings of loss. In a way they have then lost twice over.

On the other hand, pragmatically I'm concerned that the 'owning emotions' view can easily be used as an excuse for denying other people's feelings. This is probably because we secretly still hold the 'making people feel things' view and are desperately trying to avoid the possibility that we might be responsible in any way for another person's pain. I notice this in myself when I make changes in my life which are tough on a partner, friend or family member: perhaps meaning that I'm not spending as much time with them or that I'm pulling away some form of support that I used to offer. The temptation is very strong to blame the other person for any tough feelings that they have about the situation, to offer endless excuses and justifications for what I've done, to claim that is unreasonable for them to feel how they feel, or even to argue that I haven't really made a change when – of course – I have. Again this way of behaving is

common in those kinds of race conversations I mentioned before: we say that it wasn't intentional on our part or that the other person is being over-sensitive, dramatic, or derailing.

Another way: Being with feelings

An alternative approach between taking all or none of the responsibility is to recognise our mutuality and interconnectedness with other people in a way which appreciates how we, together, build our realities. Thus what we say and do can open things up, or close things down, for others, and vice versa, in an ongoing process over time.

Something that we need to cultivate for this is the capacity to be with our feelings, and the feelings of other people, even when they are tough. If we have had a role in somebody else's pain then we may be able to bear the guilt of that rather than becoming overwhelmed and requiring them – and others – to look after us. Part of this is being able to recognise the imperfect and problematic aspects of ourselves, and the limitations in what we can offer, rather than trying to project an image of a perfect person who keeps everyone happy.

Also we can attempt to develop the capacity to be with other people's feelings without trying to deny them. For example, if we have made a change that alters another person's life in ways that are painful to them, we can listen to, and respect, their feelings whilst still holding on to the fact it was something we needed to do (instead of dismissing their feelings, or going back on our decision and then resenting them for it). If we have spoken or acted in ways that marginalise or exclude others we can own up to that without beating ourselves up for our (inevitable) limitations and imperfections, and hopefully commit to being more aware next time (rather than becoming so burnt out by the experience that there is no next time).

How do we do this in reality? It is a big ask, and we are bound to fall back into blaming ourselves or others at times. However, I think that we can try to recognise that pendulum swing in ourselves and practice doing something different. For example, when we feel that first rush of guilt or defensive desire to strike out, we can attempt to slow down and notice what is going on in ourselves. We can try to sit with the emotion without acting, perhaps literally by sitting alone and allow ourselves to really feel it.

When we're more able to do this in ourselves we may also find ourselves more able to listen to other people's feelings and to stay with those – however difficult they are for us – rather than making the situation about us, or trying to escape it. Perhaps a good practice is to read some of the materials online about privilege and oppression (in relation to sexuality, race, gender, class, disability or whatever dynamics we might find particularly challenging). We can practice allowing ourselves to be with the feelings present in the piece, and any feelings that arise within ourselves.

Perhaps if we can cultivate this ability to be with feelings (in ourselves and others) we might be more able to respond in ways which are compassionate towards all involved (instead of any compassion we have for the other person meaning less compassion for ourselves and vice versa). From such a position we can hopefully act in creative and imaginative ways which recognise our interconnectedness.

Jealousy

Based on this podcast with Justin Hancock:
megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/can-deal-jealousy

Staying with feelings

The main thing with any emotional response is to stay with the feelings. We often have a narrative - or storyline - about our emotions, and the idea is to try to let go of that as much as possible and to actually feel the feelings in our body. Narratives generally involve blaming outwards (the other person) or blaming inwards (yourself) in an attempt to escape, avoid, or eradicate the feelings. If we can drop these stories and stay with the feelings we learn more about what the feelings are (e.g. there may be insecurity, loss, rejection, fear, or anger in there) and what the experience means to us.

Spot the cultural scripts

The usual wider cultural script about jealousy is that it's a response to another person's bad behaviour and - if we feel jealous - it shows how much we love them and they should stop doing whatever it is they did to 'make us' feel jealous. Alternatively, in some non-monogamous and polyamorous communities - the script is that jealousy is a bad thing that we shouldn't feel, and if we do feel it we should 'own it' as our own feeling and work on it rather than blaming anybody else for it.

Again, both of these approaches - 'you made me feel jealous' and 'own your jealousy' - are a way of trying to escape the feelings. An alternative approach is to see emotions as being relationship - as happening between people and within a certain culture - rather than viewing it through the binary of 'their fault' or 'my fault'.

Stay with each other's feelings

Perhaps even more challenging than staying with your own feelings is staying with another person's feelings, especially when they are about an issue between us. Again we have a strong cultural script that if someone we're in relationship with feelings 'negative' feelings because of something we've done then either they should stop feeling those unreasonable feelings, or we should stop doing the thing that's hurt them.

If they don't feel able to express their feelings we'll probably pick up on them anyway and this will cause problems between us. If they do express their feelings we may override our own needs and boundaries because we feel to blame and like we have to fix it, and that could also cause problems as we're not treating ourselves consensually.

The challenge is to be with each other, to express our feelings, and to show that we hear each other's feelings, without closing anybody down. If we can welcome all feelings instead of seeing some as 'good' and some as 'bad' it is easier to do this. Make the aim of the conversation to hear and understand each other, rather than to fix anybody or solve a problem.

Treat emotions as sensible

To do this it's important to welcome all emotions to the relationship rather than only some. Happiness is overrated. A relationship where only happiness is allowed will probably become quite bland or difficult over time. Can you welcome the 'difficult' emotions when they come up as inevitable and helpful rather than trying to shut them out or seeing them as a huge problem? It might be useful to check in regularly about which emotions are allowed in your relationship, and which not so much. Might you welcome in the ones that aren't present a bit more?

Consider relationship patterns

So never having any jealousy in a relationship could be an issue as it may mean you're not allowing all emotions to flow freely. But feeling it a lot over many relationships could be a sign it's something you struggle with in particular. If that's the case it might be worth doing some work around it - e.g. with a therapist or supportive friend - considering your relationship patterns through childhood and adulthood.

Revisit agreements

If jealousy does come up for you it can also be a good moment to revisit relationship agreements. Did a boundary get crossed? Are you still on the same page? Is trust shaken in a way which needs some rebuilding? The *Relationship User Guide zine* can be helpful for figuring out your agreements. Remember that jealousy happens in friendships and other kinds of relationships as well as erotic and romantic ones, so these conversations are just as relevant there.

Changing relationship agreements over time

Based on this podcast with Justin Hancock:
megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/changing-relationship-agreements-time

The rules or agreements that we make in our relationships can and should be constantly shifting, not something we lock into place forever. This is because both individuals and relationships change over time in all kinds of ways. More on this in my book *Rewriting the Rules.*

1. It's okay for rules to change
For example there are many reasons that we might decide that we have no capacity for further erotic and/or emotionally deep relationships right now. We might feel that all our capacity is taken up with one or more relationships that we already have. This might happen when we're in new relationship energy, or when we have maxed out on the number of close relationships we can handle, for example. Or it might be that we have an illness, someone to care for, a big work project, or a trauma to deal with. During that time we might decide to be single, monogamous, polyfidelitous, or to only have casual encounters, in order to navigate that period. But it might well be that we want to open up more, or change the rules, once that period is over.

2. We should let others know if the rules are likely to change
Sometimes we have a pretty good idea that the rules or agreements we currently have in a relationship are likely to have to change at some point in the future. For example, we might be planning to have a kid or to move to another country, or we might be a monogamous person who is having friends-with-benefits relationships but only until we meet 'someone'. It can be very painful to others in our lives if we don't let them know that these things are on the cards, particularly if the change will mean a significant shift - or even ending - in our relationship. If you know that a change is likely to happen it's good to be clear on that.

The final major point is that it's important to allow people to have the feelings they have around such changes. We often avoid telling people changes are coming, or avoid making changes that we need to make, because we feel hurting or angering people. Actually the trick is to get to a point where we do listen to our needs and make changes, and we communicate compassionately about that, because we can handle other people having their feelings: even if this thing we're doing is resulting in sadness, grief, fear, or anger for them. It's okay for you to change the rules, and it's also okay for the other person to feel how they feel.

Values in relationships

Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020: megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/values-in-a-relationship

Value differences are normal - and challenging

It's worth being aware that it's highly unlikely that all our values will be shared in any relationship, and also that relationships - and individual values - will inevitably change over time. So - just like fluctuations and disparities in erotic desire - value differences are a normal part of relationships (of all kinds). Embracing and discussing them - rather than resisting and avoiding them - can be an exciting, interesting, and useful part of relating.

This is not to say it's easy though. Coming up against a major value difference can also feel very threatening, especially when it's something you hold dear or something that makes you fear that you might either have to lose the relationship or compromise yourself in some vital way. This kind of conversation can lead us into trauma responses, and it's worth being very kind to ourselves and each other through them.

What kinds of value shift might happen in relationships?

We might consider examples like: having different politics or getting into a new set of ideas; one person becoming vegetarian, vegan, or giving up drinking; and one person coming to a new faith or losing faith.

A value shift is a more vital one to examine if it impacts the relationship and/or another person more directly. For example, it might do this if it affects:

- How we relate to each other (e.g. how much money we have for shared activity, what capacity we have to do tasks that sustain the relationship, whether we can be around each other's key people, etc.)
- How much we fancy, like, admire, or love the other person
- How much we see the other person (e.g. if it necessitates a big move, or spending a lot of time elsewhere)

Many options for dealing with value differences

With any kind of tension or conflict it's useful to remember that there are many options, especially when we can easily be drawn into a 'stay together vs. break-up' binary when tough issues come up. For example, all these options are possible ways forward:

- Person A consensually moves towards person B in their values following dialogue
- Person B consensually moves towards person A in their values following dialogue
- Some compromise position is found between the different values
- Some compromise position is found where each person retains their values but you find a way of acting/living/relating that represents a compromise
- You agree to differ and go to other people in your life in relation to that value
- You recognise it's an ongoing tension that will inevitably crop up every now and then in your relationship. Now you can recognise it when it happens and agree a way to engage with it at those times
- You change the relationship in some way to accommodate the value difference (e.g how you define it or how you live it out)
- You end the relationship because it feels too difficult for one or more people to continue given that difference (if it doesn't work for everyone it doesn't work for anyone)

Value differences can be good

Being curious about our values together over time can be a fun and interesting aspect of a relationship. It can give us some great topics to discuss over a meal, or on holiday. We may well learn from each other. For example, we might decide to read each other's favourite book around a particular theme to discuss, or to each read something setting out two or more positions on something we seem to differ on. Meta-communication can be good first to figure out how we want to have these conversations though (e.g. not everyone loves a heated debate and privilege has a major impact on who knows the 'rules' of that kind of conversation).

If we notice we have a lot of arguments about seemingly small stuff then it might be worth figuring out what underlying values are at stake. There are great activities on how to do this in Barbara Carrelas's *Ecstasy is Necessary*. Such activities and discussions can increase intimacy over time.

It can be helpful to think of values as potentially more than just something which might get in the way of our relationship and how they might actually be quite grounding. For example: What are the values of our relationship? How do we want to relate? What does it mean to be ethical towards each other? What values do we want to adhere to in conflict? Check out Russ Harris's *ACT with Love*, and Sophia's *Love Uncommon* posts about values, what they achieve, and how they relate to conflict.

Break-ups

Breaking Up, Breaking Down, Breaking Through

Originally published in Spanish in:
Barker, M-J. (2021). Ruptura, fracaso, superacion (breaking up, breaking down, breaking through). In *(h)amor7 roto*. Madrid: Continta Me Tienes.

When I was invited to contribute something on breakup for this collection I felt both drawn to the idea and fearful. It's been nearly a decade since I first wrote my thoughts on breakup, for a chapter in my relationship book *Rewriting the Rules*, so I'm ready to revisit the theme including everything that I've learnt on the subject since then. Most of this learning has, however, been of the experiential - and often incredibly painful - kind. As for many of us included here, I suspect, writing breakup means writing of my deepest traumas and hardest losses.

In the conventional sense of leaving, or being left by, a partner, I've gone through seven major breakups in my life. I've split with seven people with whom I've had romantic, sexual, cohabiting relationships. Often these endings were compounded by the loss of home, companion animals, and extended family and friends. Frequently I also lost my hometown and community as the breakup prompted geographical relocation.

Some of those breakups were sudden, some gradual; some involved anger and blame on one or both sides, some a gentler kind of mutual respect and sadness. With some a friendship survived, with some it didn't, and with some it became possible after some months or years apart. Most of the breakups were instigated by me, some by the other person, and some were a confusing mix where both of us thought it was the other who had done the leaving.

However, to my mind, breakup experiences extend far beyond romantic partners. Indeed one of my main arguments in *Rewriting the Rules* is that it is a detriment to both romantic relationships, and to other kinds of relationships, that we only have a model of articulated breakup for the former and not the latter.

Breakups beyond partnership

This has been brought home vividly to me during the last couple of years of the global pandemic. Of course many people have experienced conventional breakups during this time, as partnerships buckled under the pressure of being locked down together, as different responses to individual and collective trauma revealed unbridgeable gaps between partners, or as relationships embarked on urgently and quickly to avoid loneliness and isolation couldn't go the distance.

However I have seen just as many people hurt, confused, and re-traumatised by the endings of collegiate, friend, and family relationships during this period. This time has starkly revealed the

brokenness of many of the systems we've relied upon, resulting in tensions between those who demand structural and systemic change, and those who desperately want to go 'back to normal'. This has resulted in many people going their separate ways in their working relationships. Friendship groups and communities have dissolved when it became apparent that some weren't willing or able to make the changes necessary to be safe enough for those who were vulnerable due to physical and/or mental health conditions. Hidden family tensions have come to light as members returned to old dynamics during the crisis, or as boundaries were breached during sickness, bereavement, or demands for greater contact.

For myself, the start of lockdown coincided with a decision to finally step away entirely from conventional partnership relationships. During my life I've moved from unconscious monogamy, to a more conscious and open kind, to various types of polyamory, and finally to relationship anarchy as my model of doing partnership. These shifts were largely motivated by the hope of finding a more sustainable way of relating, away from the script of getting together, entwining lives, breaking up, and - often - breaking down. I wrote and wrote on the subject, sharing my work with partners in the hope that being on the same page - or at least them knowing what page I was on - would help. This rarely worked. My last-but-one ex admitted that they threw *Rewriting the Rules* across the room after reading the breakup chapter to try to make sense of what had happened between us!

I decided to step away from romantic, sexual, and cohabiting relationships entirely after my last breakup eviscerated me to a level beyond any I'd previously experienced: bringing up the repressed grief and pain of many of those previous relationship endings, as well as something much older, much more fundamental.

What I found - during lockdown - was that stepping back from partnerships in no way saved me from the pain of breakup. In fact, now that this pain was exposed like a raw nerve, each further relationship upheaval landed harder than the last. Like so many other people I went through significant breakups within my family, with a work partner, and with a close friendship group who had initially supported each other through the pandemic.

Now that I think about it, I was also going through a kind of breakup with work (having gone self-employed in 2019), with conventional ways of relating, and with my previous ways of relating with myself. No wonder it was an intense time!

What I'm left with, from all of this, is an even deeper conviction that our conventional model of breakup - and the model of relating that it is embedded within - is woefully lacking. Within that model, breakup is only used as a label for what happens when romantic partnerships are not working, and breakup involves ending one relationship entirely in the hope of finding another that works better.

Breakups actually happen in all kinds of relationships, and they happen in the particularly agonising way that they often do because of the cultural and developmental trauma that we all hold around relating. We cannot escape the pain of breakup by finding a better partner, by

finding a better model of relationships, or even by stepping away from partnership entirely. Instead we need to step *towards* this pain to learn how we might relate in different ways. This is not in order to escape pain but rather in order to navigate this territory in a more conscious way, with the hope of avoiding doing additional relational violence to ourselves and to each other.

My last partner breakup, and the other breakups that followed it, resulted in a significant mental health breakdown which I'm convinced - if I'm up for the task - could also become a vital breakthrough in the ways in which I relate to myself, to others, and to the world.

Breakups and cultural and developmental trauma

So my intention here is not to find some way in which we could avoid breakups, or stop breakups from being painful. It's inevitable in human relationships that we are sometimes going to find ourselves heading in different directions with somebody we were previously alongside. Occasionally some hurt, rupture, or conflict will happen between us that won't feel possible to resolve and repair in the aftermath of its occurrence, or even ever. Acknowledging this inevitability, and being up for feeling - together and/or separately - all of the complex and contradictory feelings that it brings up, is essential.

But that is not what we're encouraged to do around breakups. Both the cultural messages that we receive about relationships, and the relational patterns that we develop during childhood, result in ways of relating - and breaking up - which exacerbate our pain a-thousand-fold, and which make any way of doing it beyond a violent severing difficult, if not impossible.

What do I mean by cultural and developmental trauma? Cultural trauma refers to the normative way of doing things that relies upon - and perpetuates - harm and injustice. This includes, for example, heteronormativity which privileges those in 'opposite sex' romantic/sexual parterships and marginalises or invisibilises those in other forms of relationships. We could see the current dominance of a white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, heteropatriarchal, way of doing things as a form of cultural trauma in which some bodies, labour, and lives are valued far more highly than others, and some not at all. From this cultural trauma we often internalise the sense that we are not good enough unless we fit the social norms. We are sold everything from products to citizenship on the basis of reaching normative ideals of a successful self in a successful relationship.

Developmental trauma refers to the ways of relating to ourselves and others that many, if not most, of us internalise during our childhood and adolescence. Specifically, many of us grow up in families where adults are unable to tolerate our difficult feelings, and often their own as well. When we have frightening, shaming, or otherwise painful experiences which are not held and heard by the adults around us, these feelings become locked in our small bodies and we develop survival strategies in order to avoid experiencing them because they are so intolerable. These experiences do not have to be the kind of major event that is often culturally recognised as traumatic. They can also be the cumulation of smaller confusing and painful experiences which the child is all alone with due to a lack of available understanding or support.

When the adults around us are incapable of helping us to regulate our feelings, when they blame us for having them, or when they are an active source of danger in themselves, we come to the conclusion that there must be something wrong with us, in order to avoid facing the far more unbearable prospect that those who are meant to care for and protect us are overwhelmed or unsafe and cannot do so. The feelings, when we do have them, thus feel terrifying, as if we are going to die like an abandoned child would, and/or as if they are pointing to some fundamental flaw within us that must be hidden or fixed.

Cultural and developmental trauma are interconnected, of course, as it is the wider normative ways of relating to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us, which are often what is unconsciously passed on by adults to children in such ways. Intergenerational trauma is a useful concept for the ways in which trauma - from the cultural and systemic to the relational and emotional - are passed down the generations unless acknowledged and addressed.

How does all of this relate to breakup? Romantic partner relationships exist at a peak pressure point within both cultural and developmental trauma. In dominant culture, one of the key ways of proving ourselves a normative successful self is through getting and keeping a romantic partner. This is meant to be the most important relationship in our life, and to provide - forever - great sex, financial security, meaning and purpose, coparenting support, best friendship, fun, contentment, care when we are sick, and more. We're also taught - explicitly and implicitly - that a romantic relationship is our passport to ultimate happiness, so there's pressure to perform happy coupledom to those around us, and to hide any problems.

Partly because of these cultural messages, partner relationships are also the places which many of us go to in an attempt to rectify the traumas of our personal pasts, and where we often end up enacting them again. There's a deep hope that we might find the kind of love, care, protection, and belonging that we lacked or lost as a child.

We are likely to approach these relationships with the same kinds of survival strategies that we developed in our attempts to avoid painful feelings, and get some kind of love, as a child. The four 'Fs' (fight, flight, freeze, fawn), and the idea of attachment styles which we use to keep ourselves safe and/or to draw people into intimacy, are two common ways of articulating these strategies. For example, we may have learnt that we can stop people from abandoning us if we punish them with hot or cold rage whenever they fail to meet our expectations. Or we may have learnt that we can prevent close people from hurting us if we people-please and do what we think they want from us. These can become stuck habits in all relationships - or when we find ourselves in certain kinds of dynamics - which are hard indeed to shift.

The impact of this cultural and developmental trauma, means that we set partnerships up to fail. It's virtually impossible that any relationship could provide all of the things they are burdened with by the combined force of our cultural love myths and our painful past histories.

When partnerships inevitably fail to meet the expectations imposed on them we're thrown back into the kind of binary thinking which is a hallmark of both current western culture and

traumatised nervous systems: the other person must be bad and wrong, or we must be. Either way the relationship cannot continue in any form. And the trauma is reinforced as we walk away with yet more evidence that even our closest people are dangerous and untrustworthy and/or that we are fundamentally flawed and toxic.

Breakups often land as an intense re-experiencing of our early abandonment or annihilation. This is why they can feel so unbearable, with emotions like rage and terror threatening to overwhelm us completely. We may well feel as if we are dying like that abandoned child, betrayed by the very person who was meant to care for us. Or we may feel that this person is attempting to destroy us and that we must get away from a deeply unsafe situation. The only reasonable response to such extreme experiences is total breakup, and often breakdown.

The reason that the last of my own partner breakups was so agonising was that it almost perfectly reproduced the dangers, confusions, and losses of my early relationships, having initially promised so much in terms of the potential to be different. From that experience I learnt that moving away from culturally normative ways of doing romantic relationships is no protection against retraumatising unless we have addressed - at a deep, sustained, embodied level - the combined cultural and developmental trauma that we all hold within us. The further breakup experiences of the pandemic showed me that, unaddressed, the relational trauma patterns that I - and others - carry will continue to play out, severing all kinds of relationships.

Towards an inclusive, trauma-informed, approach to breaking up (and staying together, and everything in between)

One major problem here is that few people have access to this kind of understanding of what is going on in relationship breakups. Most people assume that the cultural way of doing relationships is normal and natural. Knowledge about how relational trauma operates has not yet filtered through to popular culture. We don't know we're being set up to fail, so when relationships hurt we blame ourselves and/or the other person, rather than looking to our cultural systems and/or our past development.

The fact that we are, so often, retraumatised by breakups makes it extremely hard to do things differently, because we're physiologically unable to shift into the kind of regulated nervous system which is able to see complexity, experience compassion, or engage in situations with openness and curiosity. Tragically then there is often a violent severing, which damages everyone involved yet more, rather than there being any potential for mutual understanding and forgiveness, for flexible change, or for respectful disengagement.

This is the case across all relationship styles and forms, and it can be even harder when breakups occur in culturally non-normative relationships or in relationships that are not romantic partnerships. This is because there is a sense that these relationships should be immune to such problems, and because there's a lack of available script for navigating breakups in these kinds of relationships.

So what can we do? The task - if we're up for it - is one of significant individual, relational, and cultural change. We can't simply tweak our current relationship, or relationship style, or even the current normative way of doing relationships. As with so many of our current systems and structures, we need to recognise that the very foundations of normative relationships are rotten, and we need to work, individually and collectively, towards dismantling these and building something stronger.

Individual shifts

I once read a tweet from a therapist suggesting that whether people decide to breakup or to stay together, the work they need to do will be the same. This struck me as wise. On an individual level it behoves us to notice, acknowledge, and engage with our relationship patterns so as not to reenact them in our current relationships - and breakups - and so as not to pass them on to the next generation.

Of course many forms of therapy and spiritual practice have this as an explicit goal, so there is support available for what is both an incredibly painful and beautiful process, requiring a huge amount of courage and a balance of both deep kindness and deep honesty with ourselves.

When we're aware of our patterns we can be more accountable when they show up in our relationships, as well as being more able to discern when other people are enacting their patterns on us. This can help us with the complex decisions about when to engage with, or distance from, relationships.

Relational shifts

However a solitary individualistic approach can only take us so far in this work. In order to learn different ways of relating we need to actually be in relationship! It's been important to me to explicitly develop and nurture a number of friendships with people who share these understandings and are up for working together to practice more explicitly trauma-informed and consensual ways of relating, where we support each other to notice and communicate our patterns, and to try something different.

Such relating might involve, for example, sharing deeply our relationship experiences and our relationship to cultural norms. It might involve encouraging each other to practice ways of relating that we find hard such as expressing needs and boundaries, or bringing up small relational difficulties in order to experience safe-enough relationship rupture and repair.

I've personally found that it helps to have a few of these friendships, rather than putting pressure on any one person. It also helps me to have plenty of space and slowness around these relationships in order to build this kind of intimacy gradually and to have time between contact to notice and process what's happening between us.

Cultural shifts

It's currently extremely hard, however, to engage in these forms of individual and relational work, because it goes against the grain of our wider culture.

On an individual level we're encouraged to stay busy and distracted and to avoid the solitude and difficult feelings that are an inevitable part of emotional work. There's little practical or emotional support for people doing this kind of self-care and self-exploration, and a good deal of stigma associated with it.

On a relational level there's barely any script for explicitly cultivating relationships where we explore our patterns and interact in ways that support us in shifting them. Indeed the scripts of partner, friend, and family relationships generally actively discourage such conscious relating. Loving each other is meant to come 'naturally' rather than requiring active practice, and any struggles with this are regarded as a kind of personal failing that we should cover over and hide.

It amuses me that, while a selling point emphasised by most relationship self-help books are the long, 'successful' partnerships of their authors, my own credentials for writing relationship (anti) self-help are my numerous relationship 'failures'. I'd love to see a move away from the kind of relationship self-help that endeavours to enable people to find the perfect partner or to stay together over time, or which offers alternative relationship styles as some kind of solution. Instead I'd like to see guidance that acknowledges what we're up against here and which focuses on how we might relate with ourselves and each other differently.

While we're dreaming, I would also love to see a world in which all styles of relating were regarded as equally legitimate, and where those who care for children were helped to hold and hear their emotional struggles, and to pass on deeply consensual ways of relating through both implicit and explicit learning.

But while we don't live in this queertopia, what can we do to develop and maintain systems of support for such radically different ways of relating to ourselves and each other? It would be great to see communities develop around *how* we relate, rather than *what* relationships we want. Dating and hook-up sites for various relationship forms are big business which people devote huge amounts of time and energy to. Online and offline communities have developed around various forms of monogamous and non-monogamous relationship styles. What would it be like if we devoted as much - if not more - time and energy to developing and maintaining communities around trauma-informed and consensual ways of relating in all of our relationships? How might we cultivate systems of support to shift our own patterns and to work collectively towards different ways of relating?

Hopefully the aim of such collective approaches would go beyond avoiding the personal pain of breakup. Through our explorations we would likely reach a deep understanding of the links between our current ways of treating ourselves and each other in relationships and breakups, and the wider systems and structures in which people and groups are treated as threats, or as disposable, and are policed and punished accordingly: systems and structures in which we sever ourselves from our bodies, from others, and from the natural world, with devastating consequences.

Back to breakup
Coming back to breakups specifically, how might we approach them differently?

Perhaps we might collectively acknowledge the huge relational and individual challenges of breakup and work to support those in our communities who are going through such transitions and endings. This would require moving away from the model of the private couple who keeps their struggles secret from friends, towards one of relational transparency where we acknowledge that relationships occur within - and impact - a whole network of people, and that everyone needs systems of support around relationships of all kinds.

In this model we might collectively rebalance the attention that we give to people around getting together and making relationship commitments, and the attention we give them around breaking up and separating. What would it be like if we rechannelled the kind of time, energy, and practical support we invest in marriages and similar ceremonies into breakup? Instead of backing off for fear of 'getting involved' or 'taking sides', friends might come together around people who are ending their relationships to help them, and all those involved, to navigate the transition. Where there are conflicts to resolve, or complexities around shared resources or responsibilities to consider, models from transformative and healing justice may be helpful for supporting people through the process.

Here we might also recognise multiple kinds of breakup rather than focusing only on partner type relationships. We could support each other through endings and transitions in friend, family, and collegiate relationships, as well as romantic and sexual ones. We might even recognise that similar support is necessary around our breakups from systems, organisations and communities, as well as around our breakups from places, from ways of relating and being, and eventually from life itself.

Certainly we could usefully move away from an all-or-nothing binary model of staying together or breaking up, towards a model where there are multiple options available to us, in all relationships, around how close or separate we are. Things might feel very different if levels of contact, closeness and connection were available to us as an ongoing conversation in all relationships, and if our goal was to be in mutually nourishing relationship with each other whatever that looked like. It could be expected that people would move both closer together, and further apart, in all kinds of ways over the course of a relationship, rather than there being an escalator model of ever-increasing closeness, or a model whereby levels of closeness must remain the same forever otherwise the relationship has failed.

Much of the pain of breakup is in trying to avoid it happening at all, or in attempting to avoid the pain that flows from it. An alternative approach is to turn towards this pain and to regard every relationship in our lives as a constant process of ending and beginning, of breaking up and coming together. All our relationships will inevitably change, and end at some point. Instead of railing against this, we could embrace the sadness and loss, the frustration and rage, the guilt and shame, the relief and hope, the joy and possibility, and all the other myriad feelings that accompany this, and commit to learning from them individually and collectively.

Given the trauma and vulnerability so often involved, we might shift to seeing breakup as one of the most intimate things that we can go through with another person or people. Such a reframing - away from a failure/blame model - might encourage us to approach this tender experience with great care and kindness for ourselves and the others involved, whether we're breaking up ourselves, or supporting those who are.

Thank-you for reading

You can find my other free books on my website:

- **rewriting-the-rules.com**

If you enjoyed the book or shared it on, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

- **patreon.com/MegJohnBarker**
- **paypal.me/MegJohnBarker**