

2004-2-29 Polyamory: The End of the World?

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here

to think freely, lift our hearts, name our cares
together, in this deliberate, shared community,
with history and vision and intention.

This is our worship, our common privilege
our way of turning the stardust of our lives
into bright starlight that illumines our path

and so...

**May we live fully, love deeply, learn daily, speak truly that we might
together leave the sacred legacy of a better world...**

Children's Story: Birds of All Feathers

by Ray Nandyal

This is a story about a bluebird that lived on a tall tree in the Himalayas, the world's highest mountains. That bluebird's name was Amita, which in Sanskrit, means "no limits."

Amita could spread her dark blue wings and fly skillfully way above the tall trees and the highest mountains. But she was not very popular with other bluebirds. The other bluebirds just shook their heads every time Amita's name was mentioned. They said, "Look, she flies with everybody, red birds, green birds, and yes, even purple birds. If she has any sense, she will stick with her own kind and one kind only. She acts like she never heard the saying, 'birds of a feather stick together.'"

But Amita did not worry too much about what the rest of her flock thought about her. She said, "Hey, I like everybody, and I like to fly with

everybody. I think life would be boring if we all flew only with birds that look like us."

The other bluebirds were so angry with Amita that they said, "From now no new babies will be named Amita. That name should be forgotten for ever and ever."

This made Amita feel very sad, but she said, "I will keep flying with birds of all kinds because I'm not doing anything wrong."

One night there was a huge storm. Many of the tall trees that the blue birds lived in came crashing down with their nests hitting the ground and scattering all over the mossy ground. The next morning the bluebirds all gathered together and said, "What are we going to do? We are supposed to be laying eggs soon, and we have no nests to put them in. We won't have any babies."

Just then Amita and her friends - the red birds, the green birds, and the purple birds - came flying in. They said, "Come on, let's get to work," and they started rebuilding the bluebirds' nests. The bluebirds couldn't believe that the red birds, the green birds, and the purple birds would help them. After all, the bluebirds had looked down on everybody else for so long. After a while, the bluebirds realized that the other birds were sincere, and they joined hands, I mean wings, with the others and completed rebuilding the nests in record time.

The new nests were beautiful and very comfortable. When the eggs were hatched, their parents named them. The most popular name for new babies that year was, you guessed it, Amita.

Sequence

Dying stars condensed themselves into stardust once.
And stardust condensed itself into the elements of earth.
The elements of earth condensed themselves into living cells.

Living cells condensed themselves into
organisms that swam and crawled on land,
then thundered through the trees.
Organisms that were great in size condensed themselves into creatures
fleet of foot and deft of mind,
who could gaze at the faint stars and wonder
if the light was their father,
the nourishing earth embracing them, their mother.
These quick creatures, small and uncertain,
then condensed their human lives of honest struggle
into lives of conquest and violence.
Little by little, a few human hearts
condensed themselves smaller than those vast crowds around them who
clamored for power,
and gave power up for the burden of love
given freely to all their brothers and sisters,
even the hurt and the loud and the sad.
Then these few amazing hearts condensed their saving insight
into small word... "Love one another.
Love your neighbor as your self.
Know yourself and love yourself.
Receive the Love that embraces us all."
And then those words condensed themselves even further,
into this small, small jewel of silence,
which sums the whole evolution of the creation with elegance and the
honesty of wordlessness.

silence

Reaching out into this amazing silence in love,
we are free here to gather the images and names
of all whom we love, inside or outside this church,
family and friends and neighbors
who are deeply part of our lives,
and thus, this place and time.
We see them silently in our hearts, and thank them
for being who they are,

or we hold them in tension inside of us if need be,
or we say their names aloud as a sign of our connection.

naming

Silence condenses itself now into something just as sacred, the music,
which delights, transforms, and somehow speaks of love better than any
mere word.

Readings

The First Reading is a poem from Marge Piercy's collection, The Moon Is Always Female, 1978 It's called, "A New Constellation" The prophet Ezekiel that she refers to is a writer in the Hebrew scriptures who popularized the strange, but wonderful, image of "wheels within wheels."

We go intertwined, him and you
and me, her and him, you and her,
each the center of our own circle
of attraction and compulsion and gravity
What a constellation we make: I call it
the Matrix. I call it the dancing
family. I call it wheels inside wheels.
Ezekiel did not know he was seeing
the pattern for enduring relationship
in the late twentieth century.

All the rings shine gold as wedding bands
but they are the hoops magicians use
that seem solid and unbroken, yet can slip
into chains of other rings and out.
They are strong enough to hang houses on,
strong enough to serve as cranes, yet
they are open. We fall through each other,
we catch each other, we cling, we flip over.

No one is at the center, but each

is her own center, no one controls
the jangling swing and bounce and merry-
go-round lurching intertangle of this mobile.
We pass through each other trembling
and we pass through each other shrieking
and we pass through each other shimmering.
the circle is neither unbroken
nor broken but living, a molecule attracting
atoms that wants to be a protein,
complex, mortal, able to sustain life,
able to reproduce itself inexactly,
learn and grow.

*The Second Reading is Sonnet 116 of Mr. William Shakespeare. We don't know
the exact date he wrote it, just that it was written
to a man he loved, and that it was composed
probably between the years 1600 and 1609.*

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

Sermon

Well, yes, of course. This won't necessarily be an *easy* sermon. You and I will have to work a bit to get through all the ideas, the feelings, even the strangeness of it all. Let's begin.

The press, as might be expected, covered our annual church conference, called General Assembly. It was in Boston this time, home of our Association headquarters, and thus, it was the largest such assembly in our history. Many things happened at that meeting. Social justice gatherings, amazing worship, workshops on every conceivable subject. Yet what did the press pick up on? What is the only thing that made press coverage in our own local newspaper, the Dispatch? Polyamory, a word completely unknown to most people.

The press found a polyamory awareness group that offered a workshop at General Assembly. They were fascinated. Most people in this church, as far as I can tell, didn't see the article. But the few who did, asked me about it. And, a number of other people have asked me to speak about this idea of polyamory, because they first read about it in an ad in our associational magazine, *The World*.

But I'd wager big money this morning that there are probably many more people who have never even heard of the word than know anything about it. And some of these might even feel a little worried once they learn what it means.

In any case, it struck me as just the right time to talk a bit about this issue in the pulpit, what with all the hype in the press and in the campaigns about what "marriage" means.

Polyamory is not that difficult to define in a basic sort of way, especially if you, like me, were lucky enough to have had any education in the Classics. **Poly** means *more than one* in Greek, as in the word ***polytheism***: more than one god. And **amory** is pretty easy to recognize too, I think. You know, *amor*, or *amour*, or "**that's amore!**" It's romantic love, right?. So polyamory means basically, "more than one romantic love."

Now please, do not confuse this simple definition with anything else.

Do not think that I am suddenly bringing up the former Salt Lake City, or present upper-class Muslim, practice of polygamy. Not at all.

Polyamory does not mean the same thing as polygamy, a husband having more than one wife. I have to say here, however, that polygamy...husbands with more than one wife, is *exactly* what marriage meant in the West for many hundreds of years more than it has meant "one man and one woman." Every father figure in the Hebrew scriptures from Abraham to Solomon had more than one wife, or a chief wife and few "lesser wives" named concubines, and I assure you not one of them thought they were any social radicals. They thought of themselves as people expressing the proper cultural view of things.

Nor, for those of you who are sophisticated at anthropological terms, does polyamory mean *polyandry*, a wife with more than one husband. This reality does not seem to be as popular as polygamy is around the world, but it is well known in some South East Asian cultures and apparently a few ancient cultures.

And please, don't confuse *polyamory* with the ideas of *adultery*, *open-marriage*, *serial monogamy* (as in the case of Henry VIII), or "*swinging*," or "*spouse-swapping*," or "*free love*," or anything else along that line. I am not talking about any of these things.

Polyamory is this: a committed or covenanted relationship which involves more than two people, and which usually insists on some sort of equality in the partnership.

Despite ads and newspaper articles, this is not a theoretical issue for me. I know several people who have been in polyamorous relationships for a significant number of years. Two of them are triples, and one is a quartet. I am related by blood to one of these people. One is a friend. One is a colleague. These are people I have come to *care* about. And, these are people who know something about love, just as we all do. These are people who know something about fear, just as we all do. These are

people who have tasted disappointment, just as we all do. But first and foremost, these are people.

That is my first point this morning. All human beings are just that, human, and our work as religious people is not to deal with them as ideas, concepts or representatives, but as individual human persons with their own stories to tell. Like the blue bird in the story this morning, they may be very different from you or me in how they have discovered love in their lives, but they are part of our human story just as much as we are.

So what I am saying to you is that polyamorous relationships exist right now, among people I know and care about. But true enough, when some of these people entered their relationships, the *word* “polyamorous” had not been invented. It is, as far as I can tell, a very young word, and is not found in my most recent and very good dictionary, dated 1999. At most, it’s ten to fifteen years old.

But I assure you, if you look at the internet or in the library, you can find the word all over the place these days. I even recently encountered a book called *Polyamorous Spirituality*, which took me by surprise. People have been thinking about this long enough to write theologically about it.

Now these days, without any effort on your part, you can hear people of all sorts, even national presidents and governors, telling you that marriage has always been between one man and one woman since the beginning of time. And that any other form or constellation is utterly destructive all around, a corrosive acid dissolving the very foundations of civilization.

Indeed, one of the things that people who support the President’s proposed constitutional amendment are saying is that once you allow for marriage between two people of the same gender, you will have to allow for marriage of three people of whatever gender. “Or worse,” they will add, ominously, clearly referring to someone who wants to marry his

horse. They will then go on to tell you that one man and one woman is the divine pattern for all time, and that history plainly proves this.

But this is simply not so. It's a lie. Men have had more than one wife throughout history, in many cultures, including the biblical ones, and women have had more than one husband in many cultures. Furthermore, marriage is often described by religious conservatives as a relationship between one man and one woman where the man is the "head of the family" and the woman has no real say in things. That doesn't strike *me* as a very good picture of marriage. If that's what marriage is supposed to be, then I am not sure I am for it...straight or gay.

And let's get serious...marriage, even when it is between one male and one female, is often contracted in this world between children, not adults. In Ethiopia, in our own era, children are married off at age 7 or 8. Not promised for some later date, mind you, but married. Fourteen percent of all marriages in some states in India are made between children between 10 and 14. In parts of Nigeria, 11 is the marriage age. I hope I do not have to tell you that a boy is not a man. A girl is not a woman. Yet these are all *legal* marriages in our world.

Even in New Testament times, when the many-wived patriarchs were long dead, and "one male /one female" marriage was more common, girls were married off as soon as they were physically capable of conceiving and bearing children, that is, between 11 and 13. This means that Mary, the mother of Jesus was only about 12 or 13 when he was born. She was a child, as some ruefully say today, having a child.

Am I in favor of children marrying children? Of course not. Nor I am I in favor of people marrying their horses, or any other relationship where there is no free consent, or where the power differential makes the whole idea of any mutual love or respect quite unlikely. No, I am not. Children certainly don't choose marriage partners ...they are coerced into marriages by their culture. Taking children to the dentist when they don't want to go is one thing, making them get married, I think, is something else.

But worse, despite the pronouncements of a frantic President, throughout most of history, marriages of whatever form were not freely chosen. Most marriages, including biblical polygamous ones, were arranged, family and clan affairs, not individual love trysts. I think of Jacob and Rachel and Leah in the Book of Genesis. Or I think of the tragic story in Shakespeare's justifiably famous play, Romeo and Juliet. Juliet's marriage to the County Paris had already been arranged by her family. She did not "date" him. He did not propose to her. She was simply given to him without her consent. She was certainly not to marry the man she *really* loved, Romeo, son of her sworn clan enemy.

But I think a good marriage might have something, at least, to do with love, as well as a physical and economic relationship.

In great Shakespeare himself, you will find an interesting case of someone who apparently longed to establish a polyamorous relationship four hundred years ago, but failed. His famous sonnet, 116, was written to a young man, as were most of his earlier sonnets. The sonnets are love poems, often tinged with eroticism. We do not know the name of the man for sure (hard data on Shakespeare's biography is notoriously difficult to come by), but my Shakespeare professor assured us that we do know it was a man whom Shakespeare regarded as beautiful. At the same time, Shakespeare also was attracted to an older woman...a woman closer to his own age, who was quite an intellect, a match, it would appear, to the Bard's own rather powerful mind. He seems to have been attracted to her in other ways as well.

Eventually, my Shakespeare professor told me, he decided to introduce them to each other, in the hopes that maybe they could all enter into some undetermined but mutual relationship. This was not to be, however. Apparently, the beautiful young man and older woman ran off together and formed a couple, abandoning Mr. Shakespeare as he himself had once abandoned his own wife and family.

But for a while, at least, Shakespeare apparently dreamed that "to the marriage of true minds," no one could "admit impediments." "Love is not love," he mused, "which bends with the remover to remove." Just

because other people and society at large want to rid them out of sight does not mean that a lover has to send his or her lover packing. Love is love after all, powerful, transforming, mortal, divine, wonderful, more powerful than custom, law, tradition, or social stigma. Just think of all the black and white men and women who coupled when that was against the law, not very long ago. Love, I say, is ultimately not fenced in by law.

Shakespeare dealt with his broken heart by writing his great poem *Venus and Adonis*, for which, in his lifetime, he was far more well known than for any of his plays.

In the poem, Venus sweeps down from her galloping horse and carries off the young Adonis in her arms. This describes in vivid form what Shakespeare apparently felt. In any case, his heart was broken, and he wrote bitterly of the experience in his famous poem: "Call it not love, for Love to heaven has fled, since sweating Lust on earth usurped his name. Love is all truth, Lust is full of forged lies."

But another poet, from our own time, seems to have entered into a polyamorous relationship successfully. Marge Piercy, in her poem, *A New Constellation*, writes of her experience in such a relationship... speaking of its wonder and exhilarating complexity.

*No one is at the center, but each
is her own center, no one controls
the jangling swing and bounce and merry-
go-round lurching intertangle of this mobile.
We pass through each other trembling
and we pass through each other shrieking
and we pass through each other shimmering.
the circle is neither unbroken
nor broken but living, a molecule attracting
atoms that wants to be a protein,
complex, mortal, able to sustain life,
able to reproduce itself inexactly,
learn and grow.*

These are powerful words, beautiful ideas. They could apply, I suppose, to any sort of constellation, new or old, whether it be two or three or four stars in love's heaven.

But my second point is this. Maybe you find this whole idea disturbing. After all, it seems rather new, despite its actual age. It may make you think, with your inner arms folded across your chest, "Now what?" Or in its longer form... "What do I have to grapple with now? It's so damn hard to have to deal with these new ideas. Does this apply to me? Is that guy up there in the pulpit saying that marriage between two people is old hat, old fashioned? But I *love* my wife, I *love* my husband. And how would I explain this to *my mother....?*"

No, I am not recommending this as a new paradigm for everyone. I am just saying that such relationships exist, are real, and are filled with love, and hurt no one else. And believe me, *all* new ideas are difficult to get used to. The first time I saw two men kiss it startled me for days. It's not an image I was used to, even though I am gay. Everything that is good and new takes time. Look, as a man raised Catholic, the first time I saw an Episcopal priest, who happened to be a woman, saying mass. I was startled. I had nothing against the idea of a woman priest intellectually...of course not. I was in seminary at the time, surrounded by women studying for the ministry. I just had never seen *the image* of a woman priest before. So I actually attended masses said by women, now and then to make the idea familiar.

And please don't look down on me for doing such a thing. Many Unitarian Universalists not raised Catholic were completely unable to imagine a woman as a minister just twenty five years ago. You should have heard the things search committees used to say to them, or to gay or lesbian ministers, for that matter. But both of these *images* of ministry were simply unfamiliar to everyone, even religious liberals. No one can blame anyone for not having exposure to things in a society that values conformity as much as ours. You have to be deliberate about such things. Which, I suppose, is another reason for preaching this sermon.

But this makes sense to me. For I have yet to meet a person who moves with all the changes of modern life easily, gladly and joyfully, whether it be computers, who does the dishes, or different forms of marriage. *Resistance* is an ordinary part of learning about new things, in my book.. But eventually, you take time to look at the history, to examine the context, to trust the persons involved, and then you notice the love. It's then when you begin to remember that this world has a capacity for love greater than any model we may find comfortable in our own lives. I would never suggest that anyone take up a polyamorous relationship. I frankly don't think many people would be able to handle such a complex constellation. I think it will always be a very small minority of people that can understand such a relationship as something for themselves. But because I care about people in such relationships, I want say aloud how much I support you, care for you, admire you. I am glad you are slowly beginning to claim your visibility in this world.

Now this whole idea might make you squirm a bit. If it does, my third point this morning is this: all of the folks ready to prevent marriage between people of the same sex might be feeling a bit similar. They really have not had exposure to friend or family who are gay or lesbian. They have been fencing themselves in with their controlling religion, or hiding away from their own feelings. But, whether they know it or not, they are also growing more accustomed to the idea all the time. Imagine if this discussion of gay marriage suddenly came up back when Kennedy and Nixon were running. Do you think anyone would have taken it seriously, or even mentioned it on television, or brought it up in their campaign, or worried about saying anything about it at all? Of course not. No one was ready to deal with any of these ideas back then. It was a different world. And tomorrow will be a different world too. What marriage will look like in a hundred years, no one in this room has any power to say.

So I conclude with these words. As you think about gay marriage, remember that there have always been all sorts of marriages, and that there will be forever, and that human persons, not specific forms are your concern as liberally religious people. Remember that progress happens slowly, with bumps and bruises, and that there is no other way. So fasten

your seat belts. And if it helps, and I think it does, focus on one of the most precious gifts of our religious heritage...our historic idea of a freely entered covenant between people of equal dignity. This might help you sift out what makes a real relationship and what makes for a sham relationship based on an in-balance of power and a controlling culture. Don't be afraid to admit that life is more complicated than you ever imagined, or could imagine, and remember that there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. Remember that love is a grand key that opens mysteries, a powerful force, a tender revelation, and that whether or not you can make sense of polyamory today, you already know about families and churches, where there are *many* people who love each other already, even if not romantically. Remember that more love in the world cannot possibly pose the problem that less love presents.

See, I told you this would be difficult. For heart and head both. But I hope you can see that polyamory is hardly the end of the world, but a part of its growth and becoming. But, most of all, I hope you found something in my words to make you think deeply, to open your heart to new ideas, new feelings, and to resist the cheap lies of the present, rather loveless, age of political panic and pandering. For as Juliet says in the play *Romeo and Juliet*, "Love's heralds should be thoughts, which ten times faster glides the sun's beams, driving back the shadows over the lowering hills."

Offertory

Blest is the privilege we claim, to support a church where there can be no fencing of thoughts and no denial of dignity to any human being. Such a church has an important role to play in a world that grows stingier every

day in love and peace. May we support such a church gladly and with generosity.

Prayer

Free from the notion that liberation is for other places, other nations, other times.

Free from the idea that I am finished, finalized, complete and done.

Free from the false hope that some lottery will heal any hurt in the heart.

Free from the idea that religion is handed over from someone else.

Free from the fiction that good feelings are an antidote to hurtful systems.

Free from the conviction that those who are different are on some other plain.

Free from the doctrine that human beings are born disappointments to God. .

Free from the assumption that glory is for sale, and worthiness is stingy.

Free from the mindless structures of consumerism and competition that rule us.

Free for the mind's deeper focus.

Free for the kindling of the spirit.

Free to offer hope's critique and hope's healing to a cynical, broken world.

Free to offer our lives as generous gifts to each other.

Free to replace famine with feast, and fist with friendship.

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.