



LOVE'S NEW FRONTIER

BY SANDRA A. MILLER

*It's not monogamy. But it's not cheating or polygamy, either. It's called **polyamory**, and with hundreds practicing the lifestyle in and around Boston, is liberal Massachusetts ready to accept it?*

JAY SEKORA ISN'T ACTIVELY LOOKING FOR AN ADDITIONAL RELATIONSHIP, BUT HE ADMITS TO OCCASIONALLY CHECKING A DATING SITE TO SEE WHO'S OUT THERE. Sekora's girlfriend, Mare, who does not want her last name used here for professional reasons, said she is not pursuing anyone, either, but is "open and welcoming to what might come along." In the three-plus years they have been together, a few other people have come along, like the woman whom Sekora, a 43-year-old systems administrator from Quincy, met online and dated briefly until she moved away. There was also a male-male couple that Mare and Sekora, who identifies as bisexual, dated for several months as a couple. Other than that, it has been the two of them. Well, sort of.

Through the lens of monogamy, this love connection may appear distorted, but that's not how Sekora and Mare, who is 45, describe their lifestyle. Adherents call it responsible non-monogamy or polyamory, and the nontraditional practice is creeping out of the closet, making gay marriage feel somewhat last decade here in Massachusetts. What literally translates to "loving many," polyamory (or poly, for short), a term coined around 1990, refers to consensual, romantic love

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY MAURICE VELLEKOOP

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY CHRISTOPHER CHURCHILL



in which people are lying about being exclusive. And poly is everything else.”

Everything else with guidelines, that is, although those vary according to the agreed-upon needs and desires of the people in the relationships. After all, this isn't swinging, in which a couple seeks out recreational sex. This isn't even the free love of the '60s and '70s, characterized by psychedelic love-ins. And despite the shared “poly” prefix, this certainly isn't the patriarchal, man-with-many-wives polygamy that has earned increased public attention with the HBO show *Big Love*. Polyamory has a decidedly feminist, free-spirited flavor, and these are real relationships with the full array of benefits and complexities – plus a few more – as the members of Poly Boston's hypercommunicative, often erudite, and well-entwined community will explain.

“With affairs, you get sex. With polyamory, you get breakfast,” says Cambridge sex therapist Gina Ogden, citing a well-known poly saying. Ogden is the author of *The Return of Desire*, in which she dedicates a chapter to affairs and polyamory. “Polyamory

isn't a lifestyle for everybody, any more than monogamy is for everybody,” she says. “Keeping one relationship vital is a lot of work, and if you start adding more relationships, it becomes more work.” Though common descriptors used for mo-

nogamy don't easily apply to polyamory, there is a recognizable spectrum of how open these partnerships may be. On the closed end, you might have a couple in a primary relationship who will then have one or more secondary relationships that are structured to accommodate the primary one. There's also polyfidelity, in which three or more people are exclusive with one another. On the open end, there might be chains of people where, for example, Sue is dating Bill and Bill is dating Karen and Karen is dating Jack, who is also dating Sue.

“I'm not sure there are as many ways to be poly as there are people who are poly, but it's close,” says Thomas Amoroso, an emergency room doctor from Somerville and member of Poly Boston. Amoroso, 48, who identifies as straight, has been in a committed relationship for five years with a woman and man who live together within walking distance of his Somerville apartment. Amoroso is only sexual with the woman, who is sexual with each of the men separately, but they all consider the others life partners. “No one has said the words ‘Till death do us part,’ but I think that's the intent,” Amoroso says. Divorced in 1999 after 15 years of marriage, Amoroso felt unable to express his affectionate nature in the confines of a monogamous relationship. When a woman he had just begun seeing revealed she was polyamorous, the concept, new to Amoroso, resonated. Amoroso and the woman stayed together for five years, while each sustained additional relationships, including – for her – one with Sekora that drew Sekora and Amoroso together in a close friendship that they still maintain. For Amoroso, being poly is less about sex than the authentic expression of caring for more than one person. “People tend to harp on the sexual component,” he says, “but the relationship component is just as important.”

It's complicated, as the poly catch phrase goes. It's also still surprisingly closeted. Nonetheless, Valerie White, executive director of Sexual Freedom Legal Defense and Education Fund in Sharon, says we are ahead of the curve in Massachusetts, particularly compared with the South, where teachers have lost their jobs and parents have lost their children for being poly.

with more than one person. Framing it in broad terms, Sekora, one of the three founders and acting administrator of the 500-person-strong group Poly Boston, says: “There's monogamy where two people are exclusive. There's cheating

“There's a cultural script that we learn from movies, sitcoms, songs on the radio, and watching our parents. Because there isn't a similar script for poly relationships, you have to think about what you're doing and decide what you want.”

JAY SEKORA (this page), a 43-year-old systems administrator and a founder of Poly Boston

But she notes there is no push in the poly movement to legalize these relationships, largely because there's no infrastructure for it. "It was easy to legalize gay marriage. All you had to do was change bride and groom to person A and person B. But we don't know what multi-partnered marriage looks like," White says.

"The gay struggle is a larger struggle, and as poly people we don't have to be political," says Amoroso, who, like many poly people, does see the need for a clearer legal recognition of relationships that aren't marriages. (If one of his partners were to fall ill, for example, he would want legal visitation rights.) But he also thinks the lifestyle can gain acceptance. "Most poly relationships that I'm familiar with are heterosexual, and that's a lot more understandable to people, even if they wouldn't do it this way," he says. "The fantasy of more than one boyfriend or girlfriend is fairly widespread," he adds.

Women may face more criticism for living a polyamorous lifestyle, according to Valerie Sperling, professor of women's and gender studies at Clark University in Worcester. "This is a hot-button issue for women," Sperling says, "and if a woman is out as having two or more boyfriends, people might label her oversexed, versus the 'boys will be boys' idea that kicks in when men have sex with lots of women. What a stud. What a slut." She points to this double standard as a possible reason so few poly women would speak on the record for this story.

For even more serious reasons, Opeyemi Parham kept her poly lifestyle closeted for the 20 years she worked as a physician in Boston. A divorced woman who for several of those years was in an open relationship with a male partner, Parham feared both the professional consequences and the possibility that she could lose custody of her two children, who are now in their 20s. Since leaving conventional medicine to work as a health educator, Parham says she is now beyond those consequences and wants to show people that her lifestyle is not threatening in any way. "Boston, in my experience, has a uniquely cerebral approach to life and is somewhat disconnected from the body. Therefore, issues of sexuality can be a little more volatile and open to misinterpretation," says Parham, who moved to Greenfield in 2003. "My agenda is a society where people can choose how they relate with other humans sexually without legal penalties, professional penalties, and the emotional penalty of shame and blame," says Parham.

"The conventional paradigm of monogamy is very much entrenched in our culture," says Randi Kaufman, a clinical psychologist who has counseled nearly 40 poly people in her Cambridge office. "Practicing polyamory means setting aside

the basic principle of monogamy that one person will meet all of another's needs in an intimate relationship." Though Kaufman has seen polyamory work well, she also has counseled clients on some poly-specific challenges, such as "new relationship energy," referring to an intensified focus on a new person that can cause someone to neglect his or her other partners while in the throes of new love. Just as in monogamous relationships, sex can drop off in poly relationships, too, says Kaufman, but poly people can still get their sexual needs met by others without damaging their primary relationships. Then there's the issue of jealousy.

"A lot of poly people who feel jealous say it's a warning sign that your needs aren't getting met," says Sekora. He says he's felt insecure about relationships but not necessarily jealous of his partner's partners. He recalls a time early in his relationship with Mare, however, when she felt threatened by a woman he had started dating. When the three sat down and talked, the women got along well and Mare's worries dissipated. "Sensible, mature, self-reliant, and stable partners would be a welcome asset" to their relationship, says Mare, who began to identify as poly five years ago when she tapped into the Poly Boston community. Even though she grew up in a more sexually permissive era than her mother did, Mare remembers being in high school and college in the 1980s and envying her mother's 1950s young adulthood when people dated around. For Mare, who likes the thought of having deep, enduring love with Sekora – and the possibility of more first kisses with other people – a polyamorous lifestyle is the answer.

GROWING UP IN MACOMB, ILLINOIS, Sekora never felt any inclination toward monogamy. He gave it a try with his first girlfriend at 16 and quickly knew it wasn't for him. Through



LIFE PARTNERSHIP

Thomas Amoroso, an emergency room doctor, has a committed relationship with a male-female couple.

reading about other times and cultures, the intellectually curious teen realized he might not be the only person on the planet who felt hard-wired for open relationships the way some people are meant for monogamy. As an undergraduate at Yale in the 1980s, Sekora never met anyone else who identified as non-monogamous, but when he moved to Princeton, New Jersey, in 1989 for his first post-college job in technical support, he got plugged into a bisexual community that helped him claim that identity. Through that community, which Sekora and others say has a large overlap with the poly community, he met a significant number of non-monogamous people and had his first relationship with someone who already identified as poly and was looking for open relationships. Sekora remembers it as a learning experience. "I think you can play the part of a monogamous person without necessarily having to think what it means for you," he says. "There's a cultural script that we learn from movies, sitcoms, songs on the radio, and watching our parents. Because there isn't a similar script for

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Many people find the journey from a closed to a sexually open lifestyle scary, according to Dossie Easton, coauthor with Janet Hardy of 2009's *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Adventures*, a book many consider the poly bible (the first edition came out in 1997). "Most of us will have to deal with challenging emotional responses to new experiences as we move into more openness in our relationships, and work to find ease and security beyond guarantees of love based on sexual exclusivity," says Easton, a licensed marriage and family therapist in San Francisco who made a conscious decision 40 years ago never to be monogamous again. The benefits, she says, include the freedom to engage in relationships that are not about life partnerships but may provide different perspectives, adventures in sexuality, and new connections with many people. Easton also cites the value of a poly community as a place to exchange information and support with people who understand your lifestyle.

It was Biversity Boston, a thriving, well-organized bi community, that helped draw Sekora to Boston in 1992. After a few years, he and two other non-monogamous bisexual friends envisioned a similar organization and separate social space for poly people. Their research revealed that a small, albeit active, polyamorous group called Family Tree had already been in existence locally since 1980. (Valerie White says Family Tree was one of the first established poly groups in the country, perhaps pointing to a progressive social attitude in the Boston area.) But the Family Tree meetings usually took place, and still do, in the suburbs, and its members were generally older. Sekora imagined Boston-centered, T-accessible events that could also draw an urban crowd. In December 1994, Sekora and the two others who are no longer active in the community launched Poly Boston as a mailing list of five people. Six months later, it started taking root with new members. Sekora took over the list in 1998, steadily helping it grow to its current 500 members, with an almost equal number of men and women. He says bumps in new subscription requests usually come in the wake of Poly Boston's appearance at the Boston Pride Parade or its booth at the associated festival.

While primarily still a mailing list and website with no formal organizational structure, Poly Boston hosts weekly gatherings at a cafe in Somerville's Davis Square and monthly dinners at a restaurant on the Red Line. Occasionally, the members meet for ad hoc discussion evenings or day trips. The events, which typically attract a few dozen people, are not meant to be places

to shop for partners, but some of that becomes inevitable, according to Amoroso, who attends a gathering every other month. He admits that if you've been in the community any length of time, you've probably dated a significant fraction of the people in it.

As the website administrator and first point of contact for new members, Sekora maintains his original goal of fostering a healthy, welcoming poly community here. The flavor of the group reflects the city in general, with a fair amount of students as well as people who came here to study and then stayed on. But, demographically, it is more bisexual than the city at large because of the identities of the three founding members. Information technology, academia, and biotech are well represented among the professions, but, though the group is somewhat skewed toward the sciences, plenty of Poly Boston people work in the humanities or the service industry, according to Sekora. The most obvious common feature beyond their lifestyle may be a love of

each other as well as other people outside of their stable 10-year marriage. Both Alan and Michelle identified as non-monogamous when they met and hit it off 15 years ago at a science-fiction convention in Philadelphia. Authors such as Robert Heinlein, whose stories often feature nontraditional marriages, are frequently credited with the striking overlap of poly people and science-fiction fans. But there seems to be no causal relationship between discovering these ideas in books and putting them into practice. More likely the Internet, a longtime hangout for sci-fi fans and poly people, is the common denominator.

"People have been practicing polyamory for eons," says Michelle, a social worker at a community mental health center in Lawrence. "It's not necessarily polyamory, but there is this concept of relationships with multiple people in them." She cites biblical writings that refer to multiple wives and hunter-gatherer communities where men and women stayed together for a few years before moving on to new partners. "This is com-

"Kids deal well with things they think are normal. To the degree that we can help them be comfortable with this, then they will treat it as normal. That's the theory, anyway."

ALAN WEXELBLAT and wife Michelle (facing page) have two kids, and he has a girlfriend

intellectual ferment. "It certainly seems to be a group of people who are, by and large, interested in the discussion of ideas," Sekora says. When it comes to dating within the group, Sekora observes that, unlike with monogamous breakups and social events, this isn't the norm in Poly Boston. "I think the line between lovers and friends is less impermeable in the poly community, and that can help avoid drama," says Sekora. "But that isn't the way for everyone," he adds. "I certainly know people who can't show up for an event because their exes might be there."

POLY BOSTON MEMBERS ALAN AND Michelle Wexelblat of Burlington take turns attending the cafe gatherings. As the parents of two boys, 6 and 9, the poly couple find that the get-togethers – though child-friendly – conflict with homework and dinnertime. "There's nothing that having kids didn't affect in our lives, including how we date," says Alan. That would be dating

mon if you look at anthropology," she adds.

Alan and Michelle kept in touch after the convention and eventually dated their way – although not exclusively – into their open marriage. Prior to becoming parents, they would each typically have at least one or two relationships beyond their own. Currently Alan, a user interaction designer for a local software company, has one – a steady girlfriend of four years – and Michelle has none. How long has it been since Michelle has dated anyone? "Long enough to be annoying," says Alan, who would like to see his wife find a boyfriend.

Michelle, who calls herself a romantic, says she gets wistful rather than jealous when her husband goes out on dates, and while she would welcome having someone new in her life, it also has to be the right person. There's compatibility to consider but also schedules, goals, and, of course, the feelings of other partners. Alan likens the experience of introducing new people into the relationship to the awkwardness of bringing a boyfriend or girlfriend home to meet the parents. They both note that dating outside the poly "tribe" is difficult. "It's easier to date people who already share a certain set of beliefs about relationships," says



VIDEO
BOSTON.COM/MAGAZINE

Members of Poly Boston discuss their relationships and why the lifestyle works for them.

Alan, who, like Michelle, wears a wedding band and asserts that they are both upfront about their lifestyle when meeting a non-poly person they would like to date. "Why wait until you've got the other person interested and it could be complicated to tell them?" says Michelle.

Then there are the kids, who in this case, according to Alan, understand as much about their parents' lifestyle as they want to. The two boys have attended several Boston Pride Parades, and they know and interact with their parents' partners as they would with any other close adult friends. But the Wexelblats have not yet explained the specifics of their lifestyle to their sons. "Kids deal well with things they think are normal," says Alan. "To the degree that we can help them be comfortable with this, then they will treat it as normal. That's the theory, anyway."

That theory is starting to get support from research. In 2006, Elisabeth Sheff, an assistant professor of sociology at Georgia State University who had been collecting data on poly families since 1996, launched the first long-term study of children raised in such families. While her findings are not yet conclusive, Sheff says her initial generalization is that kids raised in poly families have access to many resources, such as help with homework, rides when needed, and the additional emotional support and attention that comes from having other, nonparental adults in their lives. Sheff adds, however, that "kids in poly families also sometimes feel extremely upset when their parents' partners leave, if it means the end of the relationship between the kid and the ex-partner." She says that poly families often pass as mundane, blended families from divorce and remarriage and therefore easily fly below the radar.

Many poly people don't necessarily want to stand out, but quietly seek acceptance for a lifestyle that they say is challenging, often time-consuming, and yet rewarding. "For some people, being poly is a lot of constant work," says Sekora. "It is probably intrinsically harder balancing three people's wants and needs than two people's. But if I had to choose between monogamy and celibacy, I would choose celibacy." For Alan Wexelblat, being poly is important to his identity, but hardly the whole of his and Michelle's life. "Ninety nine point nine percent of our lives is ordinary stuff," he says. "We have jobs. We have kids. We worry about school. We check homework. For us, living as a poly couple is just living as people in modern society." ■

