

The Naked Eye

The Master Stroke

BY MARK MATOUSEK

Scientists tell us that infidelity is programmed into our genes. So is monogamy still worth the effort?

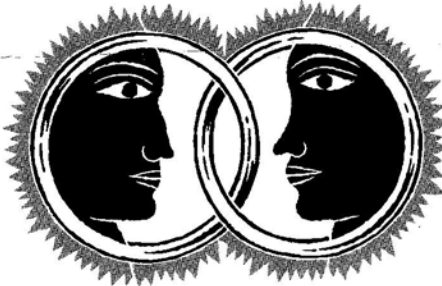
A YEAR AFTER OUR COURTSHIP started, my lover wanted to buy wedding rings. I was terrified. Things were going well with us; our hearts were cleaving, our sex life was hot, and the last thing I wanted to do was douse the flame by yoking us for life.

Why did I believe that would happen? Because every time I committed to someone, I found that, while the other hurdles of coupling could be cleared, sex invariably became a problem. No matter how lustfully love began, the pattern perversely repeated itself: The more familiar we became, the more desire failed me. Something about the traditional one-on-one, till-death-do-us-part arrangement threw my sex drive into reverse. Just as “the heart has its reasons, which reason knows not of,” so did the pelvis appear to obey its own mysterious laws, and brood like a wild creature in captivity.

This conflict wasn't just about sex, of course. I was well aware that problems concerning physical intimacy often have as much to do with power, abuse, and self-esteem (as in “If you loved me, you'd want to sleep with me”) as they do with the body. Still, having been dragged through this bumpy terrain too many times, I was paralyzed by the thought of doing it again. I could promise fidelity, I told Louis, but vows into perpetuity made me shrivel. “I'd rather have a mistress than a wife,” I said. He told me he'd wait for me to grow up.

Was I a sexual adolescent, I wondered, or was I a normal grown-up person facing a normal grown-up truth? Asking around, I found evidence to suggest that whether one is straight or gay, male or female, young or not so young, the challenge of working out an ongoing, mutually satisfying sexual life within the boundaries of a monogamous marriage is daunting for nearly everyone. I learned that some of the most soulful men I know

are unable to commit themselves because their penises just say no, and that women—though generally not as resistant to nesting—can be equally unreliable. My mother's two marriages were ruined because of her ongoing affair with another (married) man. A lesbian Buddhist practitioner whom I respect enormously insists that monogamy is just not her way. “I like to sleep with other women,” she admits. “And I'm in love with my girlfriend. The two are not contradictory.”



Is what she says possible? A Tower of Babel erupts in my head among the Inner Prude, the Inner Sage, the Inner Romantic, and—here's the scary part—the Inner-Person-Who-Wants-to-Do-the-Same-Thing-but-Is-Too-Guilt-Ridden-to-Admit-It. The voice of wisdom finally drowns out the others, saying that what may appeal to my hunter's instinct does not necessarily satisfy my soul. This voice says that underneath my drool reflex, I long more for the warmth of an insulated love than for the heat of open fire; and to this end, I must sacrifice a lesser desire for a greater one. Fair enough. But what this voice does not make clear is how to put this wisdom into practice.

On the matter of unifying sexual passion with conjugal love, spiritual teachers are rarely much help, either. Rather than feeding our romanticism, most of them—while defending the institutions of mar-

riage and family—actually deflate our idealistic notions about sex. From an enlightened perspective, sex is viewed for what it is: an ordinary human function, more like eating than like prayer. Physical union is hardly aggrandized, nor is orgasm viewed as the apex of bliss it's often cracked up to be. This sober take offends moralists, aesthetes, and New Age body worshipers, for whom coitus should be the consummation of love, sex inextricable from sacredness. While such an ideal may be possible for tantric masters, it is hardly real for the rest of us, bouncing along on our unpredictable hormones.

In fact, some scientists argue that the human tendency toward infidelity is part of a genetic trick to keep the species going. In a recent book, evolutionary psychologist Richard Wright notes that nearly 1,000 of the 1,154 human societies known to science have permitted “polygyny” (sex with more than one female) for their males. He argues that females, from chimpanzees to Park Avenue matrons, are often equally promiscuous for different reasons. Besides their purely erotic taste for variety, women may keep several males on the side to ensure the safety of their young. Lifelong monogamous devotion just isn't natural, he concludes. “We are potentially moral animals—which is more than any other animal can say—but we are not naturally moral animals.”

For me, the question isn't whether or not we are moral, or animals, but what to do with this bestial inheritance when it comes to relationship. As Robert Bly and Clarissa Pinkola Estés remind us, many in our culture have compensated for their wildness by erring too far toward civilization. Bly and Estés are right, and I would add that behind bedroom doors this disconnection is likely to wreak havoc on Mother Nature. The more civilized I behave with a partner (read: domesticated, soft), the less excitable I become.

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The more controlled I am from day to day, the harder it is to abandon myself when the lights are low. That's why sex with strangers can be so invigorating. Breaking taboos, you're suddenly free to throw off the shackles of good-old-you and grasp at impermissible parts of yourself, shadows whose reds and purples are frequently muted in the name of coziness.

Sex with strangers is not the answer for me or anyone I know, however. Although there are genuine solitaries in the world, the challenge for most of us is to find and maintain a truthful relationship to our libidos within a monogamous framework, to fuel our passion by telling our secrets and transcend our shame within loving arms. This is the yoga of true intimacy—not an artificial coupling based on vows and morals and sentimentality, but a living, dynamic union based on telling the whole truth, which alone can nurture eros. It requires a willingness to admit who you are, and what you want, to someone who will be there when you wake up in the morning, and the next. In the martial art of loving, that's the master stroke, relaxing without losing tension, the interpersonal equivalent of using nature against itself, to split a board with your bare hands.

I'm learning slowly, from my mistakes. I'm learning that sexual happiness in marriage has to do with focusing your attention, like a magnifying glass, on the same piece of paper until it ignites. It has to do with remembering the mystery of who your lover is, not being dulled by a familiar image. It has to do with opening doors, not shutting them, bringing all of yourself, including your lust for other people, as a gift to the one you love. Finally, it has to do with trusting the cycles of desire, not despairing over ebbs and flows, or—as in my own case—fulfilling old prophecies of doom and dissatisfaction.

Which is why I surrendered this summer. When the time was right, Louis and I bought our rings. Afterward, we had coffee in Little Italy. I looked at the gold bands and wondered whether they would spell disaster. Who could say? And yet I had faith that the impulse within that kept me trying would carry me past the stalling this time, to a place I'd never been.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author, with Andrew Harvey, of *Dialogues with a Modern Mystic* (Quest Books) and of an upcoming memoir to be published by G.P. Putnam's Sons.

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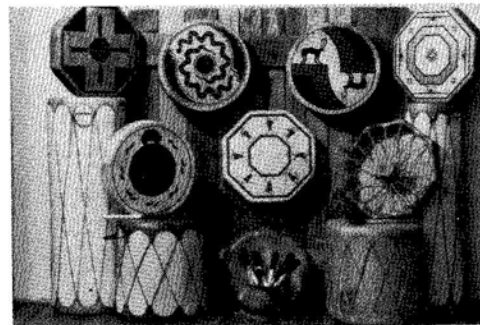
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