

Cheating: The Hold, The Release

By Shannon Gilie

We've all seen the movies—a man and a woman fall in love, one of them cheats, the other finds out. Then comes the ensuing fallout of emotion: “I don't understand! Why did you do this to me?” complete with a waterfall of tears. In a moment, the balance is gone from the relationship. The cheatee doesn't know how to trust the cheater. He feels vulnerable, powerless, alone, and incredibly unfulfilled. At the same time, polygamous relationships exist, honest relationships in which the “others” know about each other, and even feel fulfilled (gasp!) by their own positions in the relationship. These polygamous relationships, illegal throughout most of the world except for some African and Middle Eastern nations, demonstrate that monogamous relationships are not the universal relationship type of choice. If this is the case, then why is such precaution taken by monogamous pairs to avoid cheating? Why are we as a culture so convinced that monogamy will yield the greatest fulfillment? Society is the dictator; the rules and customs that define each generation generally permeate from person to person. However, can people justify their reactions to realizing they have an “unfaithful” partner if they think past the societal norms, and delve into their own experiences? Why does American culture insist so strongly that alternative types of relationships, like polygamy, are wrong? The justification may not be as easy as it seems in the movies.

A common cause of infidelity is the unhappiness one partner experiences in the relationship. In “Love's Labors,” Laura Kipnis describes “working on a relationship,” and the dilemma that occurs when using “rhetoric of the factory [as] the default language of love.” She asserts, “A ‘happy’ state of monogamy would be defined as a state you don't have to work at maintaining” (394). Happiness occurs simply from being in the relationship, not from the struggles and successes that we consider inherent in human interaction. This state allows lovers to not feel tied down, uninhibited in day-to-day activities. At the same time, each partner actively seeks the other's attention in the bedroom, in a “friends with benefits” scenario. While this arrangement seems ideal, it omits, at least in Kipnis' description, a deep emotional connection as a requirement for a pleasing relationship. Perhaps this point is the basis for negative reactions to cheating; cheatees' responses are based in the breach of emotional trust, symbolized in the physicality of cheating.

While destroyed emotional trust is the cause of many unsavory situations, an emotional breach is not necessarily well established by a cheater's actions. Greater issues are caused by disconnects in information. As a classic example, many male cheaters act because they are dissatisfied with their sex life at home, but are otherwise content. Female partners, who tend to cheat for emotional attention, believe this same emotion is involved in the actions of the males (Weaver). While emotion can be challenging to remove from logical thought, it may be beneficial for both parties, once the initial roller coaster of emotions has ended, to sit down and share their opposing perspectives. The cheatee may find that she does not fully understand her partner's motives.

Of course, her feelings are justified by American culture and media. Carrie Underwood's “Before He Cheats” describes in great detail the reaction of a strong woman to her partner's infidelity. Strength is a theme in the tune; women whose hearts have been crushed seek a source

of courage. As Underwood soulfully describes the smashing of her boyfriend's headlights with a Louisville slugger, female listeners find solace in the anthem. When they find themselves in situations similar to the one Underwood describes, the desire to destroy all of their partners' possessions seems only natural. But love is a mind-blowing force; it doesn't always make sense, as most people in relationships realize at one point or another. True love withstands the test of time and hardship, and desires growth. Perhaps the cheatee who is shredding her ex's belongings never developed true love in the relationship, but the danger lies in people turning to the song in every cheating scenario. For people to feel peace and growth, they must dig to a deeper spiritual place within.

Kipnis discusses the evolution of today's standard couple: one male and one female (traditional), equally devoted to one another because of the love they share (not so traditional). In the last few millennia, Western culture's familial unit consisted of a man and woman, but they were often married for reasons other than love: security, money, peace. These reasons today are considered almost immoral, as it is expected that everyone find that one person who understands them like nobody else can. Kipnis considers this development in her essay:

"The odd thing is that such overwhelming cultural uniformity is also so endlessly touted as the triumph of freedom and individuality over the shackling social conventions of the past...Equally rickety is the alternate view that these arrangements somehow derive from natural law—love as an eternal and unchanging essence which finds its supreme realization in in our contemporary approach to experiencing it." (Kipnis 398)

This "eternal and unchanging essence" is the stuff found in Disney movies and Nicholas Sparks novels. As young children, Americans absorb the tales of *The Little Mermaid* and *Snow White*. As adults, chick flicks and romances like *The Notebook* permeate the media through means such as jewelry commercials and hardware store ads. (Yes, every time a young couple is shown painting their house, viewers see a little bit of concocted relationship paradise.) All of these examples focus on our "contemporary approach" of heterosexual couples, and the unmatched happiness they have found by being with that one person in particular.

But there's more to be said here. First, let's get rid of the heterosexual title. In the realm of cheating, gender is irrelevant. Now, let's remove the societal pressures, the indoctrination that's occurred since we were born. Creation is a far more arduous process than destruction, but let's see if we can mend the relationship changed as a result of a straying partner. Here is the first point of business: decide if the relationship is still worth keeping. Often, cheating happens because the relationship itself has gone stale. The people involved have become busy with other matters, such as work, kids, or school. Perhaps the flame has grown dim, or burned out altogether. However, if all parties decide the relationship should be saved, then that is enough of a reason for it to continue.

This is the point at which the cheatee must be completely honest with himself, the point at which immense personal growth will undoubtedly occur. Of course, the movies always make personal growth appear so difficult, and at times it is. It is helpful in this situation to recognize that so many aspects of life are left unexplored because of social norms. We think our culture arose organically from "natural law," and therefore any changes we subconsciously want to make go

against “nature.” While this may seem counterintuitive, it is an exciting opportunity for both the couple and the world at large. When all parties of a cheating situation work towards understanding each other, the relationship becomes new and enthralling again, and deepens the commitment. Commitment is lauded, and when outsiders see the relationship, they recognize its depth and aim for deeper relationships as a result.

In the understanding process, lovers may arrive at some new questions and conclusions. Perhaps a strict monogamous relationship isn’t ideal for the couple involved. With little social construct for this realization, the couple is able to make its own rules about how it wants to function. The key here is acceptance. The unhappiest people in the world are the ones who don’t accept themselves or the people they care about. Since the deepest reason for relationships is to develop happiness and fulfillment, couples should feel no shame in doing what they believe makes them happiest. This is true freedom.

We all hope that the world in which we live is evolving into a happier place, with less conflict and more peace. The world is so massive, though, that we forget we can enact change within ourselves. If all of the people who had ever been lied to, cheated on, or hurt by a partner deeply considered the reasons for their reactions, peace would permeate much farther into society than it does currently. We have all committed sins against each other, and very few of us seek forgiveness because the cultural norm is to reject it. This is a flaw in society; we cannot become better if we cannot recognize our wrongs. The cheating scenario presents an opportunity, one in which a significant amount of growth can occur because it starts between two people, each making the decision to take ownership of the situation. If small doses of forgiveness occur between individuals, then forgiveness has a basis to occur in larger, more volatile situations involving many more people. At this level, growth and understanding take root in society, and this depth lets the walls that we all place around ourselves crash down because our world is finally supportive of new experiences, and happily doing so.

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