

*Hi Franklin, thanks for joining me. You are in - to the external barometers of the poly world - a really successful "poly relationship". Or rather many!*

I think that part of the reason for that is that I have several massive failures under my belt so I've learned what not to do!

*And yet you even managed to take two girls to the prom back in the day...*

I did!

*So you already knew what kind of worked.*

Well I didn't end up staying with either one of them so perhaps not! And the complete catastrophes happened after that.

*Which is why I'm really excited to know your inside stories. Because the one thing that comes across for me when I read your articles is that you're 'sorted'. You have your head on your shoulders and you give clear cut guidelines on consent, boundaries and all the things we need to know... yet it's rare that you share your weaknesses and - for want of a better word - your humanity.*

And that's something that Eve [co-author of More Than Two] has commented on several times too. With "More than Two" we tried to change that. "More than Two" was the first time I'd written about myself and experiences instead of just the things I learned from my experiences. And that's what the memoir is turning out to be and I tell you it's really scary. It's not the kind of writing that comes easily to me. It makes me very vulnerable and I'm really struggling with it.

*Is it bringing up a lot of pain?*

It's that and also that I am not good at this type of writing. I'm not good at being vulnerable. It's a new style of writing and it's a subject that's not easy to talk about.

*I'm the opposite to you... that's all I can write about! But I want to learn about the harmonious way to deal with a breakup and the game changing relationship which I hope you're bringing us with your memoir. It's what everyone wants to know about.*

If there is one! I'm not entirely sure that there is a graceful way to deal with that.

*Well your advice would be appreciated for me right now. One of my relationships has evolved a lot over the years. That involves a lot of forthright discussion, what we believe a relationship should look like and in the end an frank admission that if we had not been open from the start we probably wouldn't have lasted this long. Do you like me have any children? Because that makes a transition all the harder.*

My live-in partner has children with her husband but I don't have any children of my own. When you look around the poly community there's a lot of blaming and shaming around game changing relationships and also particularly when there are kids

involved. They say it's bad to have a game changing relationship because it upsets your life and you're not supposed to do that.

They say that 'you must put the kids first' but they never really say what that means 'to put the kids first'. Maybe what they mean by that potentially is that we can't have any disruption in their lives even though disruption is a part of life.

*My boyfriend and I live right now in a household which looks to all intents and purposes "normal" - two kids, two parents under the same roof. And I asked him what his thoughts might be around an eventual transition. My sex drive has changed over the last five years after childbirth from the perspective of hormones, body image and quite simply time. And that makes a huge difference in our relationship. His sex drive is as robust as it ever was but mine is diminished and that means the power dynamic is off. I'm always the one that has to say 'yes or no' to his desires which produces a sense of pressure. And that's a difficult situation to cope with, for both of us.*

Is he unhappy with the situation?

*No not right now; we're very happy right now. Polyamory has helped in so many ways. It means that he's been able to connect and bond with others but it doesn't replace the need in our relationship. And it's very difficult in our community to be able to find a long lasting partnership to bring him the satisfaction that he wants. It may come at a certain point in time that he would be better off being single - even if it is as my roommate - and if that doesn't work because the dating pool is so small here in Sweden, I think he might find that he wants to move out altogether to give him the best possible chance of finding love, sex and romance.*

That actually echoes a lot of things about my relationship with Shelly who is the person I'm writing about in the game changer. She also had a lower sex drive. I have a very high sex drive and exotic tastes. When we were living together she and I we faced in the same kinds of problems because she was the one who said yes or no just because my sex drive is a lot more vigorous than hers.

On top of that we had this thing with everyone was saying that she was the 'home-wrecker' because when she came along my 18 year marriage dissolved which must mean that it's her fault right? Because we have to assign blame somewhere. Never mind that they were always structural problems in that marriage, never mind that one person can't actually take another person because people aren't like tennis shoes or property.

We ended up living together for a number of years before she went back to school and in fact when she decided that went back to school we became long distance. We really tried to make it work. We tried to see each other every weekend and then it became every other week and then finally reached the point where she said "Look I don't have enough time to be anybody's girlfriend and I really want to transition our relationship to a non-romantic one." And that's where we are now, she lives on the other side of the country to me. In fact two days ago was our 13 year anniversary.

*So you still consider yourself in a relationship with her?*

Yes we are still life partners, we are still family, we are not sexual partners anymore until we ever find ourselves living less than 3000 miles apart. But right now that's pretty much the way it is - I see her once or twice a year, I'll go out of Florida or she'll come out here sometimes.

*For me the whole domestic allocation of duties isn't conducive to romance. Like talking about cutting the lawn is not sexy. Did that contribute to your decline in sexual compatibility?*

Shelly and I lived together pretty well in terms of the chores, and running the household. We do well as domestic partners. But for her she felt stress around the sexual part of our relationship - and not because I was intentionally telling her that she had to have sex with me - but she was aware that I wanted more than what she wanted to provide. The hard part of living together was the constant reminder of that.

*Yes. I've been taught as a woman that I should be satisfying and servicing needs; this has traditionally been our role and I find it difficult to know that my boyfriend has a need that I'm not satisfying and even more so that he is finding difficult to satisfy elsewhere simply because of the dynamic we're in.*

Sex is very much one of my love languages, one of the ways I express love and affection so having sex with one person doesn't mean that that replaces having sex with another.

*So when did you come up with this term game-changer?*

I've been using the term for a long time and I was looking for a metaphor for a relationship which totally upends what you think is possible and what you want your life to look like. My ex-wife and I got together when I was really young when we were both 19 and at that time the word polyamory didn't exist. I had never met anyone else who was polyamorous. I thought I would have to make a lot of compromises to be with my ex-wife, to try and protect her, to give her security and give her power over my other relationships because with any other partner I would have to do the same thing. I thought that if I was ever going to be in a stable relationship that meant that I would have to give up these things.

My relationship with Shelly was the first time I ever realized actually "No, that there are other people like me and I don't have to give these things up in order to have a stable longterm relationship." So that for me was this incredible game changer in the literal sense of the word and once you know that something is possible, that changes what you're willing to live with as far as the compromises you are willing to make. The compromises didn't feel nearly as onerous when I thought there was no other way to live but as soon as I realized it was possible not to have to make those kinds of compromises that changed everything and now all of a sudden those things became intolerable.

At just about the same time I had started dating Shelly I was in another relationship which had been going for about three years. My ex-wife decided to veto this other relationship for no clear reason that I can understand even to this day. So as I learned that my life could look some other way, I also had this 3 year relationship ripped out from under me and when you put these two things together, they were completely devastating. It became impossible for me to stay in my relationship with my ex-wife.

What happened was that everybody, including people in the polyamorous community, vilified us saying ~

'Oh you broke your promises to your wife. Shelly took you away from her. You're totally undermining the premise of polyamory.'

But the poly community at least in the US has really changed a lot in the last couple of decades. It used to be particularly in the mid-90s, very hierarchical, very couple focused, very much like 'you can be polyamorous but one of them has to be the primary relationship and all the others can be lifestyles accessories'. And at least here in the US the community is not like that anymore.

*I would say that here in Sweden there is much less hierarchy. Mainly because they come from a friendlier commune mentality and a liberal background. There is a lack of class distinction which is so prevalent in the US and UK. Many things are accepted and they are able to self-express but nothing is considered 'remarkable'. The language facilitates a much more middle of the road thinking and accepting culture. It seems to me that polyamory here didn't pass wholly through hierarchy but moved very quickly towards a more egalitarian setting.*

One of the things that I have even talked about, is what if the relationship that I had with Shelly had gone a different way... what would the poly community look like in the US now? Because I was the first one to talk about these ideas, the fact that we don't have to have hierarchical relationships. 'The Ethical Slut' which was the big book to shape the culture was very focused on primary couples in hierarchy with veto.

I haven't read the second edition but I hear that it doesn't take such a strong stance on these principles, but the first edition was very much of the mind-set that you have to have one partner and then you have others on the side. I started writing about the things that I had learned from my experience with Shelly and the big part of that was the 'Secondary Bill of Rights'. Shelly said that the agreements and the rules you have with your wife are really disenfranchising to me and you're not giving me a voice in my relationship, you're not giving me a place at the negotiating table. It seems really obvious to me now. But at the time it was ground-breaking and I didn't have any role models to follow.

So Shelly sat down and we came up with the secondary's Bill of Rights and I posted that on the website in 2003. Then I started receiving huge amounts of hate mail. People would email me and they would say things like

"Well a secondary should be grateful for whatever they get because they're getting something that they really shouldn't have anyway" or the big one over and over again was "If secondaries want to have these rights if they want a say in a relationship they should find a primary of their own."

It took like probably three or four years before the ideas starting soaking into the culture. And I wonder if I had never written that page if I had gone the other way, and said 'oh yeah I have to stay married'... would this kind of hierarchy be a mind-set. Maybe.

*So it's not only a game changer for Shelly and you, but a game changer for the entire community as it filters down to from the US to the rest of the world. Is she proud of that? Because it's a real achievement.*

That's a difficult question. Shelly is very sensitive to other people's opinions. She feels that giving people a voice and power over their relationships is an absolute ethical necessity and she's written about ethics in the blog posts but at the same time she is also very aware that the end of the relationship was very hurtful to my ex-wife and feels some responsibility for that.

She is happy that the poly-community is focusing on agency and consent. We're both happy that the poly community looks at the needs of all of those involved but she's not happy that the process was as painful as it was.

*If there's one person who can understand pain, it would be me! My boyfriend says I live in a paradigm of pain which I found insulting to start with but then I thought 'No! I'm good with pain. We all have roles in this life! And I help people reframe their pain. That's my mission with postmodern woman, that there is pain and if you deny it or try and suppress it, if you don't fully express you can't really chuck it away and move on. And say, hey you know this pain? It taught me so much.*

Yes that's very true. In a lot of ways, it's funny that the strangest things can have these knock on effects. We can never predict the way people come together. I would never have predicted that Shelly and I would be together and I certainly never have predicted how much it would change both of our lives.

She was actually moving out here to live with us. So she went back to school when she and I were living together, she got her master's degree in bio-informatics with a minor in pure mathematics with the idea that she was going to get her doctorate and work in a lab doing longevity research, so she found a PhD program here in Oregon and got accepted to it. She had moved all of her stuff over here, and was four days away from moving but they called her and told her that they had a funding cut and we're eliminating the PhD position that you've been accepted for.

I had to ship all of her stuff back to her and she found the doctorate program that she's enrolled in right now in Florida and ended up going there because in four days that was the only thing she could find. And in Florida she started dating another partner. So what would her life look like, what would our life look like if our funding

hadn't been cut? We were talking about re-establishing the romantic part of our relationship. And it was gonna be another game-changer.

If I was living with Shelly, I probably would not have started a relationship with Eve, which would mean the book wouldn't exist! And if the Mars curiosity mission had failed, I probably wouldn't be dating Eve. She was in town for a science convention and had been following me on twitter so we decided to meet each other and have some dinner. And we did and she went back up to Canada, and then she ended up back here in Portland because there was an event for the curiosity landing which was showing the feeds from NASA on the big screen. When it succeeded we decided to go out to a bar to celebrate... and we were like 'hey, I kind of like you!'

There are these incredibly thin threads which can be interrupted at any point along the way and it can radically effect the outcome, like the butterfly effect.

*What is your overall reaction to being famous for your love life?*

When I started writing about polyamory I wasn't writing for an audience. And that was something weird about "More than Two" that for the first time I was actually writing for someone else. What I was trying to do when I first started writing was the stuff that I wish I would have known when I was first screwing stuff up.

I started writing in 1999, but it was in 1992 that I had my first colossal relationship failure that was entirely my fault. It really took years for me to recover from it, and to understand what had actually happened. So I was writing for that person. The version of me back then who screwed up this incredible relationship. And when the site started running away from me, I was really caught by surprise because I didn't think that it was something that other people would like, only because I didn't think that there was anyone else like me.

I get a lot of email from the site. Even now, but in the early days emails came pouring in and one of the most common emails I got was 'God there are other people out there like me, I'm not the only one!' It's a really empowering thing to know that other people are encountering the same struggles. They weren't alone, and nor was I.

*I'm hoping that you have built up your sense of self-esteem so that when you write this memoir which really taps into your personal space that you will be able to hit 'publish' with confidence.*

It's alien to me. Eve says 'well we need to sit down with a bottle of rum and I need to interview you about these experiences so you can get the vulnerability out there.' She's looked at the first draft of the book and it doesn't have that vulnerability that it needs to have. There's going to have to be a lot of re-working... it needs raw emotional reality.

*You're very governed by your pre-frontal cortex!*

In the way that I write, yes. I write about what I learned without the process that got me there. And this book has to be all about the process, that's what it is. It's difficult to write about the emotional process. I can talk about it, but I can't write about it.

*Do you feel that the bunny ears man is more of a persona to hide behind?*

Actually I think it's just the opposite. Wearing bunny ears in public means it's harder to hide really, you have to be more out there because you have people notice you who otherwise wouldn't. And one of the things that it has done for me is to let me be more vulnerable. It would be easier not to wear them, but it's a way that forces me every day to choose the person I want to be. To choose to live authentically, to present more of me. It's been a tool for learning how to interact with people in a more a way that is more authentic and vulnerable.

*I started writing as a way to express my pain and suddenly I've become the 'postmodern woman' - I've become my blog. People read all these stories and they think, 'boy she must be in a lot of pain' but actually it's only while I'm writing that I am deep in the pain, but when I shut my laptop the pain is gone and released. That's the purpose of writing it.*

*But people choose to attach those experiences to me as my identity, whilst I'm none of that - it's just some experiences. It's not who I am. I think if I were to put on a pair of ears, or become known for a pair of ears, then at a certain point in time I would want to throw them across the room and say 'Look, I'm still me without the ears! My ears do not define me!'*

Ha ha. One of the things that Eve and I came across as we did the book tour was to interact with hundreds of people every day. People who we had never met, but who had read stuff we had written and who therefore assumed an intimacy that wasn't there. They had read the book or they'd read the blog and they felt a sense of intimacy with me which was strictly one-directional because I didn't know anything about them. That was a little unsettling. That can happen to anyone in the public eye.

*Do you think that's one of the reasons you write about lessons learnt because it shields some part of you?*

I wouldn't say that was conscious since I didn't write for an audience. It was for that earlier version of me and you get good at what you practice. So I was practising that kind of writing. Here are the mistakes, here is the way to solve those mistakes. But I never practised that vulnerable type of writing so I never gained those type of skills.

*When did you move out of the whole drama triangle, playing the victim or blaming others for your hurt? We all go through it I think.*

That took a while. When I was in my relationship with Ruby, which was the one in 1992 and I refer to it in "More than Two", for a long time I felt like I had been the victim in that. That Ruby had 'done' things to me. And I felt that was true because I was hurting. And if you are hurting then obviously someone is doing something wrong.

I also think it's a journey but that a lot of people get stuck there. It took me 5 years or so before I realised that actually, no, what happened there was that I had expectations which were unreasonable. I had poor communication skills and I didn't understand that just because I feel bad doesn't mean that someone else is doing something wrong. I learned that other people are real, that they have just as much right as I do to have their lives look the way they want them to. It's a hard lesson to learn even though this seems obvious. We are social creatures, and you would think that we would be born with that knowledge. But we're not.

*From my own experiences I have a relationship where I could have played so many things better, we all could have. But I'm not talking about the others. I'm talking about where my own responsibility lies. Better communication like you said, facing my own insecurities. Nevertheless I still believe that certain needs stemming from nature and nurture intertwined, clash fundamentally.*

*I have a particular sensitivity around blind loyalty. I don't like it. One of my partners felt the need for loyalty and in the absence of that loyalty, there was no possible way to have a relationship. Do you believe that these things can always be transcended? Are they worth transcending in terms of personal development?*

I think that a lot of relationship problems can be solved by good partner selection. I believe that there are a lot of people who are fundamentally incompatible with each other and there might be hundreds of reasons for that - different outlooks on life, different needs. The human condition is huge and there are people who are just plain incompatible with each other and no matter how much you love them, you can't be good partners for them. If we were to recognise that the world would be a better place.

I don't have any animosity at all for my ex-wife for example, she and I still talk occasionally. I don't believe that she was wrong to want monogamy. I don't believe that she was wrong to want security. I believe that some of the ways she expressed those needs were destructive but that's a very different thing to saying that the needs are wrong. And I think that we are simply incompatible but that we genuinely and sincerely incompatible.

*But you were compatible for 18 years?*

We were compatible until I realised that I was making compromises that I didn't have to make and didn't want to make. And until I realised that the areas where we weren't compatible, I was not the one who was most strongly feeling those. There's this thing that people do, where they say I want to feel secure so in order to feel secure I want to control our relationship. In the way that my ex-wife and I were doing that, particularly the structures and rules that she was imposing on me, the people who were really strongly affected by that, were others. We were shifting the emotional risk onto others. I was telling people 'It's ok if you love me but not too much, you have to stop here. It's ok for you to want a relationship with me but not a really close one.' So I was simultaneously inviting people in and pushing them away.

What we do in polyamorous relationships when we feel insecure, is that we shift the risk onto third parties. And that's really not cool. It took me a long time to realise how damaging that was to the people around me because I was too caught up in 'I have to make this relationship work'. I was preoccupied with trying to take care of my ex-wife and assume this responsibility. I was blind.

*Do you believe that game-changer is a product of a shift in 'world' perspective or personal awareness?*

Good game changers are. Good game changers make you aware that life has more to offer than you first thought. Good game changers make you realise that you can be a better version of yourself. I felt that the beautiful thing about my relationship with Shelly, was that it made me have to step up as the best possible version of myself. But game changers can also be destructive. Sometimes it can show you how bad a relationship can be. For people in abusive relationships, it shows you how you might have weaknesses which other people are capable of exploiting, that you have weaknesses that people can use against you.

*But how else would you find those weaknesses if it's not for that horrible, horrible experience? Wouldn't they forever remain covered and festering inside of you? From my own abusive relationship... I would say it was ultimately worth it, because it truly made me realise that anyone, me included was worth more. If he hadn't treated me badly maybe I would have remained in denial with a poor self-esteem.*

In the best possible world I think we can learn we have weaknesses without having those weaknesses used against us. There are gentle ways and less gentle ways to learn about these vulnerabilities. I learnt about the weaknesses in my own life because Shelly was able to come to me and challenge me. She says 'I have a question...' and then says something which totally up-ends my world view. But she never said it with malice.

Abusers use them for control, they use them to manipulate. She believed that everyone is acted with the best integrity they can, but we no longer believe that. It took me a long time to figure out that there are bad people. There are people with malicious intent.

*But these people are malicious because they themselves are damaged?*

Possibly. We can identify with the person who does malicious things whilst still not condoning the malice and still recognising how damaging that is. And choosing not to have anything to do with that person. These types of relationships are very expensive game changers which are harmful and destructive.

*I have difficulties when I think about this in relation to my children. I know I have grown through pain, not all the time, but in many of my experiences. The lessons that they experience through pain will be limited unless I let them go, set them free to make their own mistakes. And that's a terribly hard line. If I am to see them go through*

*the same amount of pain that I have gone through, it will be the most difficult experience of my life.*

*At what point do you say that the pain is worth it? That this was an experience I needed? You went through an experience which in your own words you termed 'a colossal failure' - could you have avoided it? Would there have been a better way through it? This thing, your experience, has made you a leader in the community. It has changed everything, the direction of polyamory itself in the US.*

I think experience is the best teacher, but I also think the tuition is really high. A lot of the mistakes I made, I made because I didn't have a role model. I didn't know that there was a path through the situations that I was dealing with and I think if I had been able to see someone dealing with these problems, that I would have had someone say to me that communication is really important if you want to solve problems with your partner and here's how you do it. If someone would have stepped up when I was having the problems with Ruby and said

'Wow, it seems like you have needs that you aren't expressing and you're punishing her for not meeting them...maybe you should think about using these tools for handling that',

I think the outcome would have been a lot better. I think that experience is not the only possible teacher. I think we can learn from other people's experiences. I think we can learn from other people's mistakes and role models. I think the poly community now is in a much healthier place because we have had so many people go through these things and are now able to act as role models.

In a sense, yes, somebody has to make those mistakes but they don't have to be made by every single person.

*And that person was you.*

That person was me. Or at least one of them.

*It would have been nice if I had found your blog before I mucked up my relationship.*

It would be nice if I could go back and give my blog to myself.

*I was too excited about the possibilities of limitless love as I saw it then, to pay it any heed. When I read Cunnig Minx's '8 things' book, which I loved, I thought that realistically there was no way I would have listened to any of it in my state of NRE. I was too naive. Yeah yeah - I've got it...and I'm in love! It's not the kind of scientific experiment you can run. You can't go back in a time machine and teach your younger self.*

In a lot of ways we're not dealing with anything new. But polyamory is not just nonmonogamy it's an entire framework, a way that we look at non-monogamy so as a framework it's new but as basic human experience this is not new. People have been

struggling with these things for a long time, maybe not in this form. But this is an essentially an exploration of humanity and these issues are as old as we are.

Culturally and socially we do a very poor job of transmitting tools for dealing with romantic relationships. We have created a cultural mythology where there is one path that we're supposed to follow, one path that romantic relationships need to follow and if you don't do that you're doing something wrong. And then we throw people out into the world and we say 'Alright, here it is this is all you need to know.' And we're really doing such a tremendous disservice because we're not giving them the tools they need.

*Relationship education should be in school.*

Yes, that's exactly right. If we teach people religion, history mathematics...why don't we teach people relationship education. Arguably this is more important than all of that.

*Just one more before I let you go because I feel that I've taken you and wrung you out into small pieces. I have to say that in the beginning I was a little scared of your opinions. They are very direct. It scared me because through my own insecurities - like many people who come into polyamory I was already questioning everything around me.*

Yeah, I'm trying not to do that! One of the most valuable things that Shelly did for me in our relationship was to challenge me. To make me into the best version of me I could be. I try and particularly now the book is out, to express myself more compassionately.

*I don't think it's you. I wasn't meaning to criticise you. It's much more about me or the mindset of people when you first go into poly. Your line is 'Take it or don't'. You're not being mean, it's very straightforward. I think simply from where I was standing, the uncertainty I was in...I just wanted to hide. Not only was I doing everything wrong according to the world I had come from, I was doing everything wrong in the world I was trying to adopt. Is more compassion needed? Or is it actually more compassionate to be the way you are which is straight to the point?*

I think there is a way to say what you are trying to say which makes it more accessible. And I want to be accessible. But I recognise that I ask a lot of people; in "More Than Two", we're expecting a lot from our readers. We're expecting people to be able to grapple with their own insecurities and demons.

*But that's not work that you can do for them. That's work that needs to be done by them. It's hard, it's really hard but no one else can help you do that work.*

And we say, look if you're not willing to do this work then your relationships aren't likely to succeed. Yes, we're expecting a lot of courage. If you're reading this we're expecting you to step up and do some really, really scary stuff. I wouldn't want to come across as saying if you aren't perfect you can't be poly, because it's a process and

really, it never ends. We all make mistakes all the time. Perfection is not a pre-requisite. But compassion is. Courage is. Integrity is. And without working for those, I don't know whether polyamory is really possible.