

Does Polyamory Include Personal Liberty?

by Dawn Atkins

"Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

-Benjamin Franklin

"And neither will he receive either"

-Rocco Galati

Although most my peers would quite appropriately apply these quotes when criticizing our government, I have lately been wondering how much some people in the poly community could think about how liberty as it applies to their personal relationships. Does your "emotional safety" really justify making strict rules about how your partner(s) may, or in most cases, may not interact with others? Does this infringement of their liberty really bring you lasting safety? Is it worth it?

I have been non-monogamous for thirty years. Long before the word "polyamory" was coined, let alone long before there was anything that could even be called a "poly community," I was choosing my personal liberty over the "emotional safety" of people I cared about. The rules of the culture I grew up in were clear in stating that to be involved with more than one sexual partner at a time went completely counter to "emotional safety." In other words, if I was more worried about how other people felt than my own personal freedom, I would have been monogamous in the first place!

I still truly believe in the fundamental right to personal bodily integrity.

My body, my right to decide.

My right to say "no" also includes the right to say "yes."

I choose what to do with my body and with whom.

I decide the limits for my body, my mind and my heart.

I was willing to risk a hell of a lot for my beliefs. For many years, I was the only ideologically non-monogamous person I knew. I was called slut and bitch and every other name in the book. I was told I deserved rape because I was non-monogamous. I gave up at least one person I was madly in love with because I refused to let his jealousy rule my choices. I risked and endured societal, familial and community censure in order to be able to express myself sexually.

I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than to those attending too small a degree of it.

-Thomas Jefferson

This is not to say that I don't care about other people's feelings. I am a caring person willing to listen to and support my friends, family and lovers. I do not believe that supporting them means giving up my own fundamental rights.

I have been willing to modify my limits to protect the physical safety of my family. I practice mutually agreed upon safe sex guidelines. They still give me quite a bit of choice in what I can and cannot do with my own body. I also try to manage my choices in a way that supports my prior commitments.

Responsible non-monogamy does not mean that you do anything necessary to make other people comfortable. It means taking personal responsibility for and being honest about your choices. It does not mean making promises, breaking them and then lying about them. It does not mean doing whatever you want and damn the consequences. It means never making promises that go counter to your personal integrity in the first place.

I know that a lot of people in my own friendship circle will probably not agree with these statements. I ask that folks think before so readily giving up the choices we are fighting for, even for someone you love.

The politics of our government right now tell us that giving up the right to free speech is for the public good – for national security. Free assembly, freedom of travel, and many other fundamental freedoms are all being sacrificed for security. Most of my friends understand how dangerous and ultimately, doomed, these sacrifices are. How does my loss of liberty make you feel secure?

Yet, the idea that you can cure jealousy in a relationship by giving up your personal autonomy seems to me to be just as doomed and just as dangerous. How many monogamous people think that it guarantees a lifelong commitment? Jealousy is the insatiable monster – the more you give into it, the more you feed it – the bigger it gets. You cannot guarantee anyone's (not even your own) love.

Does my not fucking anyone else really mean I will always be with you? Does my not kissing anyone else really make me want to kiss you? Does my not having a connection with anyone else strengthen our connection? How does my loss of liberty make you feel secure? Even if it did, does that really justify your limiting my choices?

People often wonder how I ended up with two long term partners I love so very much and an extended community of friends/lovers. Truth is that it wasn't until I decided that I would rather be alone than give up who I was that I found anyone willing else willing to love me for who I am. I had to love myself enough to be willing to hold onto my own

rights first. Those who know me also know I have paid dearly for this commitment to my ideals.

I believe Franklin was right. You can't buy security by giving up your liberty. I am committed to trying to find ways to have both – for myself and others. What are you willing to commit to?

“Life without liberty is like a body without spirit.”

-Kahlil Gibran