

rethinking
EVERYTHING
SEX magazine



issue one

This is the inaugural issue of **Rethinking Everything SEX magazine** and I had so much fun diving deep into the wee beginnings of rethinking sex. There are some wonderful, inspired stories for you! **PARENT magazine publishes** again on April 1, July 1 and October 1 this year. On May 1 the second issue of **LIFE magazine publishes** and on June 1 the second issue of **SEX magazine publishes**.

In case you don't know, you must subscribe to each magazine separately to receive the issues automatically. Sarah has dug deep and chosen to leave RE Publishing to focus entirely on her family and Barb is immersed in her 16th international conference on Rethinking Everything... join us!

Love, *Barb*

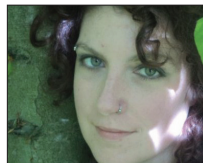


have you read the blog? ...
it's, well, hard to describe. you'll just have to read it.

in this issue



The Poison That Bit You (is your medicine)
Julie McIntyre



Unearthing Me
Eve Latchouli



Surrounded by Love: Our Alternative Family
Nikki Shields



Loved is a Person
Osie Gabriel Adelfang

Rethinking Everything SEX Magazine (RESM) strives to protect the intellectual property rights of others. All written content and graphics on our site and in our publication are property of **RESM** and may not be copied without the express permission of **RESM**, which reserves all rights. Re-use of any of **RESM's** written content and graphics for any purpose without **RESM's** permission is strictly prohibited. Email publishers@rethinkingeverythingmagazine.net for info.

Submit your own story of change: www.remagazinesex.com

The Poison That Bit You *(is your medicine)*



Sex.

**How can a three letter word, sitting harmlessly
on the page, have so much power?**

Sex—the word, the thoughts, the images it conjures—elicits so much consternation; demands obscene amounts of attention from pulpits and pundits; stirs deep, dark secrets, juicy details and internal longings. From presidential indiscretions, to golf pros, actors, teachers, no one is immune from the impact, the ramifications and the meanings inherent in this word. Not even a shy, reserved, white girl from a farm in northeast Iowa. That's where I was bitten by the poison of repressed sexuality, protestant conformism, un-asked questions, secrets, injunctions about wildness, rules of behavior and my family's

psychosis. All these things played a significant part in provoking my destiny to be writing, teaching and speaking out loud about sex. Moreover, they heavily influenced my character development, a soul need for deep intimacy, a hunger for things and experiences that are genuine and real.

I learned very young and very well that some skills are important to children so they can learn how to adapt in order to survive in the families into which they are born. Into families who have expected someone other than a

wild self, families who have limited life skills with which to navigate the territory of living a life, and very little skill in raising babies.

It was year eleven of my life and since I had been born a girl, not the third boy my father needed and wanted as a farmer, he had to hire a high school boy—a state wrestling champion—to work the chores I was too young and not yet strong enough to manage. My older brothers had married and moved their own lives on in separate

no wound. I do not feel like a victim or that I want to prosecute him or that I want to rescue other people who have been sexually violated. I have no interest in being in the drama of it. Even at eleven years old, as emotionally incapacitated and spiritually bankrupt as I was, I had a keen, yet secret, understanding of my silent compliance in it. However wrong it was at the time, this first violation was not forced.

Thinking of it now as I write about it, it's as if I'm

Because of the palpable presence of repressed sexuality, repressed emotions, repressed love, repressed spontaneity and child-like joy, I repressed this thing. And each thing that happened thereafter I tucked away in the secret hiding place I kept in the basement of my soul.

directions. The hired hand was a senior in high school, 17 or 18 years old.

How it began, the first intimation of it, his first words or moves, I have no memory of. What I remember is the fondling, rendezvous in the barn, the touching when no one else was around. I remember the details of a sexual event that years later I would learn was called sodomy. At eleven, I had no name for it, no understanding of the impacts of it, nor would I know for several decades how it would be a significant piece in the shaping of my life and whom I've become.

It was the first in a series of similar events in my life that can quite often cause damage to young girls and women, as well as to boys. The events themselves weren't so harmful; it was what happened afterward that caused the damage.

Those events no longer have an emotional or psychological charge for me. There is no residual shame, no embarrassment, no feeling I had done something wrong,

describing a photograph in a book of memories. I'm there, I can see the details. The primary feeling is the one I carry still: sad for being so utterly alone in my experience, in my existence. The sadness may never be remedied. And I don't mind it so much. The feeling of being alone is gone. When I look back at that time and see the child I was, she's not alone anymore. I broke the thing that kept her alone for so long - the secret of it.

The description of that moment in my life was never heard by another human being for nearly twenty years. It stayed there because of shame, embarrassment and primarily because I didn't have anyone to tell it to. I could not imagine anyone in my life who would even want to know that thing. What would they do with it? What would be the point of telling it? Why bring up something that happened so long ago? On and on the questions went. Moreover, what words would I use to describe it? For a long time, I didn't have the language to use. But as long as I kept it secret, this eleven-year-old girl would remain wounded and tortuously alone, making the wound deeper,

the scab thicker. The thicker the scab grew, the more insulated I became from the outside world.

There was no one in my family I could trust, no one who had the maturity to hear such a thing from an eleven-year-old. Because of the palpable presence of repressed sexuality, repressed emotions, repressed love, repressed spontaneity and child-like joy, I repressed this thing. And each thing that happened thereafter I tucked away in the secret hiding place I kept in the basement of my soul.

When I reached my sixteenth year, things, and I, began to change. The combination of adolescence, a little drug use, older friends who viewed sex the same way as they did breathing, led me to see other ways of being in the world, other possibilities, other options. The sixteen years of repressed rage began to burst at the seams. I started to fight for my own life, I began to find my own voice, I tried to make my mouth form the words, “No,” and “Yes,” out loud, directly rather than accommodating myself to situations, to life.

When I told my parents I was raped at sixteen, the news was met not with compassion, listening, holding, tenderness. It was met with anger and wanting to file charges. It was their interpretation of compassion. What else could they do? They were ill-equipped as so many of us are. I was ill-equipped and ill-prepared to figure out what I needed, much less to ask for it. The level of intimacy that was required in that moment was 180 degrees from everything we knew then. And it was a far and wide divergence from the family scripts and dynamics that had been put into place unconsciously even before I showed up all shiny on the family stage.

Telling them didn't go well, a failed experiment. I reverted to my previous mode of silence and secrets amidst making a lot of rebellious noise. Alone still, I revisited the agreement I made when I was six, “Count on no one. If

I'm going to do anything, do it myself; less pain.”

There is a common misconception about the nature of wounds. Too much emphasis is put on the wound itself. A wound is just a wound. Falling off our bicycle at six years old and scraping our knees and elbows is part of the rites of passage; it's what happens when we learn to ride a bicycle. That is, if we have parents or adults that run to us and help us up and wipe our tears, hold us close, arms



wrapped tight around us so we feel held and comforted while we cry out the pain on our knees and elbows, and the fear that was in us as we were falling and the fear of falling again. If we have someone we love and trust to wipe our nose, nurture us, and help us back on the bike (when we're ready to get back on) and care for our cuts and bruises, and then take us out for ice cream, life does indeed go on.

The story goes in a much different direction if we fall off our bicycle and get scratched up and our tears and upset are met with, “Stop crying like a baby,” “That's not so bad,” “How will you be a man if you can't stand a little pain?” “Don't be such a sissy,” or, “It's not a big deal, everyone falls off their bicycles, you just have to get right back on.” When wounds are met with this kind of response, the wound doesn't heal. It doesn't go through the normal

stages of healing from the inside out. It crusts over, leaves a scar—sometimes visible, sometimes not—and the original wound is still there, still hurting, still influencing our choices and behaviors underneath the scab that can be torn off at any moment by a similar comment later in life. How a wound, violation, or a betrayal is treated after that determines whether or not it will be a worse wound or a healing. When war veterans return home, the damage

the look in my eye and my psychosis. It took work and time to disengage from family and cultural beliefs and values about sex, about my body, about the rightness or wrongness of sex, about saying things out loud, about wildness and spontaneity and being happy and becoming whole. I think we all have to do that for ourselves at some point: question why we have certain beliefs, why we have this value and not that one, and are they still true for us?

I believe in Invisibles. I believe the Universe answers pleas and prayers and I believe we each have a genie (genius) that is living inside us waiting for a chance to be out in the world.



Because of Eros, that trickster God of love and sexual attraction (and the chaos that ensues), sex is involved where he's hanging out slinging arrows. Eros leads to psyche. Psyche, the name of the soul, is called up when matters of Eros tug at our heart strings and our libido.

The nature of Eros, through sexual and love longings, is to tumble us head on, or heart first, or maybe even groin first, into the depths of psyche. Falling in love, sexual attraction, sexual indiscretion, sexual rendezvous, sexual abuse,

done in war is compounded, often to irreversible degrees, if they are treated uncaringly in the weeks and years they spend trying to integrate back into their previous lives.

Sex has always been an undercurrent in my life. It influenced my choices, my dress, the sway of my hips,

sexual fulfillment, and more, have inherent within them the seeds of reflection, self-examination, psychological turning points; opportunities for growing, maturing, changing behaviors. It's the nature of Eros and Psyche, sex and soul.

This is what happened for me. Sodomy at eleven, rape at sixteen, dangerous liaisons and a lot of men's hands on my breasts, a lot of sex in backseats of cars in the years between. I didn't like the direction of my life, how unprepared I was to be in the world, how ignorant I felt, how shy I was, how trapped I felt. Deeper and deeper I descended into the depths of my psyche and began an earnest, semi-conscious effort to transform myself.

I believe in Invisibles. I believe the Universe answers pleas and prayers and I believe we each have a genie (genius) that is living inside us waiting for a chance to be out in the world. My genie was shaped in early childhood, by significant life events and major decisions. It developed a particular intelligence and facility with sex and intimacy. To give it life, I had to break every injunction I had about saying things out loud; making noise; being invisible; keeping secrets; taking up space; saying yes or no audibly, directly and clearly. I re-negotiated the agreement made at six years old to not trust or depend on anyone. I started to depend on others, to trust them. I found someone to whom I could tell

everything and in telling those things, the eleven-year-old in me was no longer alone, no longer suffered the pain of being so utterly alone.

As I told those long held secrets to my lover, to my friend, he held me and comforted me, saying he was sorry those things happened, and sorry I had to carry them for so long



The shadow side of sex, these wounds, forced me, in order to be free, to find the teachings in them, to find the medicine inside the poison. They forced me to see inside the craziness of my culture, my family, myself. Like all good teachers, they forced me to see inside that poison, deep inside that poison.

all alone. He held me in silence and in his caring, and told me all the wonderful things he loves about me. He held the woman I am and he held the young girl I was. As he did so, the wound of that time began to heal from the inside - so much so that there are no scars.

of my own sexuality. I doubt I would have without the poison working so long inside me.

How hard it is to honor these most important of our teachers.



Many indigenous cultures say that if you survive the bite of a poisonous snake, you carry the medicine of that snake or animal. With that medicine living inside you, you have a responsibility to understand its role in your life, and to give its strength and power to the people of your community so that you and they can live. Not just survive, but thrive.

The shadow side of sex, these wounds, forced me, in order to be free, to find the teachings in them, to find the medicine inside the poison. They forced me to see inside the craziness of my culture, my family, myself. Like all good teachers, they forced me to see inside that poison, deep inside that poison. Each place the poison touched inside, I found the sacredness and wholeness and power

Julie McIntyre
lives in the Gila Wilderness of Southwest New Mexico.

She teaches Deep Ecology and Earth Medicine Apprenticeships when she's not exploring her beloved wilderness looking for teachings from the Wild.

Her first book, *Sex and the Intelligence of the Heart; Nature, Intimacy and Sexual Energy*, will be released by Inner Traditions in May. She can be reached through her web site: www.gaianstudies.org

Unearthing ME

You know how it's so easy to pull up a new little plant? It's not deeply rooted so it comes up with little effort. What are some reasons to unearth a plant? Well, maybe it needs a bigger pot, room to expand. For the sake of my story, this plant was planted in the wrong environment. Some plants require lots of sunlight, and this particular plant survives best in shade, and will wilt and die in direct sunlight. So, you pull it out, transplant it to its proper environment, and it grows into the full healthy living thing it was meant to be. It has full, luscious leaves, deep green in color. It drinks deeply of the moist, dark soil, and rests in the cool shade. It is thriving.

Now, let's pretend that our little plant stayed planted in the sunny spot in which it wasn't meant to thrive. No one ever thought to transplant it. Through sheer determination, it survives. It takes nutrients from whatever soil it can reach. It sends roots deeper and deeper, trying to extend its life. It is able to sustain itself, but is never truly happy. Its leaves are brown, shriveled, and ragged. This is a hardy breed, but will never reach its full potential in a place so opposite its nature.

I was that plant. I was planted in a life that didn't allow me to blossom, to grow full and alive. I sent my roots deeper and deeper, trying to find life in that arid place, and when I finally realized that I was in the wrong spot, I had roots planted deep in hard, dry soil. Imagine the agony of ripping myself up—pulling tough roots out of a life into which I felt cemented. I had resigned myself to thinking

that my life was just going to be hard. According to my beliefs, transplanting to soil that fit my nature was wrong. I was always told that this dry, sunny place was where I was supposed to be. I was to thrive here. And if I didn't, then I was the problem.

So, let me explain a little of this allegory. The dry, sunny environment was a beautiful life. It was a life that a lot of women thrive in. It was a 17 year marriage to my best friend that produced six beautiful children with whom both I and my husband were fully in love. What more could I have asked for? Why was I never really happy? We had good honest communication. We were the traditional, Christian home that people in our social circles deemed not only the best, but the right way to live. We were married for almost 18 years, had given life to six children, we owned two businesses, and a beautiful home

that we built together. Our golden retriever-chow mix completed our white picket fence life. But I never felt like a “real” person. I felt like I was watching myself from a distance, rarely fully alive in the moment. Something didn’t feel right.

My husband and I met when I was 14 years old. We began dating when I was 15. I had survived an abusive childhood and was very much a little girl at that point emotionally. I loved the attention I was getting from him. He was a clean-cut, popular kid in our little Christian school, outgoing and compassionate; a golden boy. I was backwards, anxiety ridden, and had no self-esteem. I was amazed that he wanted to date me. He came from an unbroken family. He was smart and hardworking. At age 17, he’d begun working in the wood shop at his dad’s construction business. I was impressed by the ease he seemed to live life with. We had a comfortable familiarity between us that made conversation and laughter easy. He took so much joy from life. No one had ever treated me as kindly as he did.

I remember thinking one day, at age 15 and a half, about my feelings for him. I’d had a sudden intrusive thought while talking to a friend that had me wondering if it was possible that my feelings for him were platonic. I’d never had a man in my life, and considered the possibility that I wasn’t really romantically attracted to him, but wanted a caring male figure in my life. It was a short moment of wondering. I put the thoughts aside. Maybe I did so because I couldn’t imagine giving up the love and stability I was getting from him.

His family took us on our first date to a Cavaliers basketball game in November, 1993. They were just the opposite of my family. His two parents loved to hang out with their children and give them lots of love and attention. I so enjoyed that family environment, and wanted to recreate it for myself. His parents had married young and encouraged their children to do the same. They believed it was God’s will for humanity to save sex for

marriage, get married young, have children, and raise them to be Godly. We followed in their footsteps for many years.

We would discuss how he thought about sex more than twenty times a day, and that I rarely, if ever, felt sexual.

From the start we lacked sexual intimacy and shared romance. Our honeymoon night was awkward and unsatisfying. I was rarely able to be in a sexual mindset with him. We blamed it on my childhood abuse issues for quite a few years. Through all those years, he was patient and loving. Although he felt rejected and undesirable, he

put aside his own needs for intimacy again and again. He settled for me wanting to please him at times, and at other times he balked. We would go for weeks to months at a time not having sex because it was too frustrating for him to accept that I was having sex with him “because I loved him and he wanted to do it, not because I wanted to.”

I would complain that he was not romantic. Anything he tried to do to be romantic fell flat or irritated me. I was unhappy and blaming myself for the depression I lived under a lot of the time. I would tell myself that I was just not thinking positively like the Lord wanted me to. I wasn’t counting my blessings. We didn’t attribute my depression to our sexual mismatch. We just kept reading our Bibles, and praying that things would start to turn around. I began to resent that he found so much joy every day in little things. How was it possible that he found it so easy to be happy, and I didn’t? More so, I resented him thinking about sex. I didn’t want it to be a part of my life. It had become a sore spot for me. We would discuss how he thought about sex more than twenty times a day, and that I rarely, if ever, felt sexual. We’d never had sex with anyone else. He was a virile young man in a monogamous relationship. He couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t want sex as much as he did. I spoke to other women about this. Some responded that they too had no desire for sex. We assumed that men must just want sex more than women. When I came across women who said they had great sexual desire for their husbands, I felt inferior. I deduced that there must be something wrong with me. I would try to make myself feel sexual with him, and it would be

short-lived. Like for a few minutes. And I would come away feeling unhappy and emotionally dissatisfied. He would take notice and ask what was wrong, and I would come up with the best answer I could...something that'd happened that day to upset me must be lingering, or "I just don't know." We struggled like this for years, never quite understanding the core issue.

Throughout my childhood and my teenage years, I always had "special feelings" for girls. I didn't label them as sexual; I just knew that I really, really liked this or that girl at different

times for different reasons. I realized later that these were crushes. The religion I grew up in, a small sect of Christianity similar to Mennonite, was smothering. It was all encompassing. I had myself wrapped up in so many threads of religious red tape that even my husband's family's sect of Christianity seemed liberal. I'd never been allowed to cut my hair or wear makeup or even pants. All of the women in my family and church wore their hair in buns on their heads. Women were to be meek and quiet. Sex was a taboo subject, really not a good thing, except for the purpose of reproduction it would seem. So when I developed a crush on my best friend at age 16, I didn't recognize it for what it was any more than all of the other crushes I'd had as a child. Even when it developed into wanting to hold her hand, touch her silky waist-length hair, and even kiss her, I was in the dark about my sexuality. I knew it made me feel guilty to have these feelings. They continued into my 17th year—the year I graduated high school and got married. Finally, I faced up to my feelings and told my best friend (who was in a religion similar to mine). She took me immediately to a pastor who deemed the cause to be the abuse I'd suffered from my father between the ages of 4 and 10, and instructed me to write him a letter telling him how he'd messed me up so much that I was having feelings

**I would cry and beg God
to take this burden away
from me each time a new
attraction would develop.
It never worked.**

for my best friend that I shouldn't be. I wrote the letter. I was truly angry at my father for his abuse anyway and embarrassed that I had revealed these feelings to my best friend, who not only didn't feel the same, but thought I was weird!

I went home and told my newlywed husband about this, fearing he would leave me because I felt that I'd cheated on him, even if only through emotions and desire. Despite his Christian upbringing, he was liberal-minded, and admitted that he had had thoughts about guys at times too, and that he thought it was natural. He figured that we all have "sinful" thoughts, and as long as we don't act on them, we shouldn't feel guilty about them, because we are all born sinful. So, on this premise, we were always honest with each other about the attraction I felt for women. He was aware of every crush I developed and then squelched because it didn't fit into our belief system or the life we were struggling to build. I would cry and beg God to take this burden away from me each time a new attraction would develop. It never worked. All that worked was squelching my sexuality completely. I became asexual. My husband felt this deeply, and it became a source of contention throughout our marriage.

We both went through life dreaming that someday I would love him like he loved me. We discussed how I didn't want to have sex with him, how when he arrived home from a trip, I greeted him with much less enthusiasm than he felt for me. He would ask, "Are you in love with me?" I would reply as honestly as possible. I didn't know. I wasn't sure what that felt like. I knew that I loved him. I knew that I cared for him, that I always wanted him to be part of my life. But that wasn't a satisfying answer for him. He wanted desire and passion! He wanted me to say, "I am IN love with you!" He kept telling himself that if he just tried hard enough it would happen. My love would change from one of a close friend to one of a romantic partner. I told myself the same thing. We held onto 'someday' like a lifeboat, hoping it would sort itself out because of our commitment to each other and the years we'd spent together. Our mismatch tried to reveal itself in many other areas. We fought bitterly at times, about

parenting, household duties, and money. All the while I felt this underlying sense of resentment and didn't know why. I didn't want it to be there. My husband would ask me, time and again, "Are you mad at me?" And I would say, "no" when I couldn't think of any reason why I would be, and "yes" when there was any little thing that I didn't like at the time, which felt like a lot of attacking to him. It was a vicious pattern.

Finally, we let go of those religious beliefs. We were growing, expanding our minds, and moving past their debilitating constraints. We were so happy to be free.

**It felt dangerously good.
Dangerous because it threatened
the only security I had ever
known and was sure neither I
nor my children could live happy,
healthy lives without.**

It gave us a common ground that masked our sexual problems for a while. We were in our twelfth year of marriage, I was pregnant with our sixth child, and we were reveling in our newfound spiritual freedom. We talked extensively about everything. We both grew as our own individual selves, held our own ideas and beliefs about nature vs. nurture, and creationism vs. evolution, and so many other things. We became more open to exploring and discussing what was behind our feelings for each other and our sexual desires. I was able to express exactly how far my fantasies about women went. I allowed myself to think about my desires to live with a woman, to wake up, have coffee together, and watch the sunrise. We took this in stride, still knowing that our goal was to be married, at least to raise our children together.

Our lives were interrupted by the deep depression that overtook me six weeks after the birth of our sixth child. We were struggling to come to terms with the rejection of his parents over our change in beliefs, and also to

figure out why I had suddenly become nonfunctioning. I was constantly anxious. I couldn't do anything but cry and shake every day. I was afraid to go to sleep for fear I wouldn't wake up. Then came the depression; so deep, so black that I wanted to die. I hadn't taken medication previously because I feared the side effect of wanting to commit suicide. Now it wouldn't make a difference if the medicine made me want to commit suicide or not. I already wanted to. I began taking Zoloft, and within six weeks I felt like a new woman. I felt the best I'd ever felt. I was homeschooling and then later unschooling five children, taking care of a baby, and helping my husband in our business. I was free from the chains of religion and felt empowered; I was ready to take on the world. A little over a year after my son's birth, I decided to go off my meds. It seemed to be going well at first, but after about six months, I crashed again. This time I had to leave the house...and do some deep soul-searching. I went to stay with my great aunt. During this time of searching for myself, I read stories about gay people, read gay magazines, and watched *The L Word*. I explored living out that life in my mind. It felt dangerously good. Dangerous because it threatened the only security I had ever known and was sure neither I nor my children could live happy, healthy lives without.

I came home to a different house. My husband was organized; he took care of work, dinners, baths, homework, etc. all on his own. I was impressed. And I wanted to make this marriage work, despite what I was beginning to realize about myself, and so did he. We tried many little tricks that the magazines talk about. We went on trips together without the children. We made time for each other to discuss the deep issues, not just the day-to-day stuff. We even went to a last-ditch-effort, weekend marriage retreat that taught us a lot about good, healthy communication. Communicating better meant that we didn't get angry and throw insults. We discussed how we felt, and what we needed, then took it from there. All these things led us to the truth. We did not share the same sexual desires. It wasn't something simple like, he wanted lingerie on me, and I didn't. It was that I preferred women, and so did he. It was certainly not an overnight process. We began with allowing me to acknowledge out loud that I had these desires. Maybe this would mean that I was bisexual. We discussed having a threesome.

He was very excited about that idea. I wasn't into it. We continued having sex; he encouraged me to think about whatever would turn me on. But I had a crush on a specific woman, and she came up in my mind more and more. Eventually, I had to stop in the middle of sex with him, and tell him that I was thinking about her, not him, and I just couldn't do that. It felt dishonest. He agreed. Random sexual thoughts about women in general were fine by him, but when it came to an emotional attachment coming up during sex, he finally held up the red flag. Up to this point, he'd been more than emotionally generous. Now he felt intruded on enough that he told me, "You just have to go out and sleep with a woman and see if you really are gay." I did NOT want to. I told him no. He insisted. I cried. I had a feeling it would be the beginning of the end, and I did not want to lose this secure family we had built for our children; the secure family that I'd grown up without, and wanted for my kids so very badly. I was not being realistic. This marriage was about us too, not just our children. He wanted me to step outside our marriage to prove that my desires that had only grown over time were not going to leave him eventually alone. He said, "If I'm going to have to start over, I want to do it in my 30's, not in my 50's when our kids are grown." Scared as I was, I understood that. He also hoped that I would sleep with a woman and discover that it was just a fantasy, great in imagination, but not a realistic need.

And so I found someone through a friend, who was in an open marriage, and I met her. We began a relationship, and from the first time we slept together, I knew I was gay. I hoped that I was only bisexual. We had an open marriage for a little over a year. This evolution felt like a slow death at times. My husband had to come to terms with the fact that I would never return a romantic, monogamous love to him. We tried to keep up our own intimacy. We took

a weekend to ourselves at a hotel about six months into the open marriage. It was there that I finally admitted to myself and to him that I was not interested in sex with men. We were sitting on the couch, and he went to put an arm around me to kiss me, and I involuntarily pulled back. It was a turning point. He told me that unless I desired to have sex with him, and felt that desire for a long while before we did it again, he wanted to stop. He wanted separate bedrooms. I agreed. Sleeping in the same room was becoming more and more awkward for me, as well as for him. Living in the same house during this time was difficult, yet gave us the opportunity to evolve together, instead of becoming resentful and growing apart. We kept up communications, although they became more painful. It hurt to hear him tell me how much better intimacy was with a straight woman, although I knew it would have to be. It hurt him to hear how it felt so right for me to be

with a woman.

We still had nights sitting on the couch talking after the kids went to bed. We still hugged and sat next to each other. I broke up with my girlfriend and found another. My husband

**We knew that we wanted dissolution,
not a true divorce, because we wanted a
peaceful separation, for our sakes as well
as the kids. We'd been together since our
late teens; we will always be parents of the
same wonderful children.**

had been with his girlfriend since shortly after I found my first. Things between my new girlfriend and I began stabilizing and the conversations between my husband and I became about how I wanted to start college in the fall to become an RN, how he would support me until I graduated, and then we would divorce. We knew that we wanted dissolution, not a true divorce, because we wanted a peaceful separation, for our sakes as well as the kids. We'd been together since our late teens; we will always be parents of the same wonderful children. We didn't want a sour relationship. So we kept talking.

The kids had begun questioning why we were spending so much time with other people. Five months into the open

marriage, we told them. We told them that I was gay, that we wanted to stay together, and that we would continue dating other people. Of course they were confused and hurt, fearing that we were going to divorce, and fearing what that meant for them. They didn't want parents who lived apart. They were afraid that we would move far away from each other, and that the six of them would be split up at different homes at different times.

They'd started school since I'd gotten post-partum depression, and feared having to leave their school and friends if one of us moved out of the community.

When we began talking about

separating we were not sure how or when to tell the kids. We discussed it often. It ended up coming out in bits and pieces. I was looking at the prices of rentals in our area, and my oldest son caught me looking at a rental sign while we were driving. We told a few of the kids at a time, trying to cater to their different emotional responses. The younger kids cried, and the older kids felt a little relieved. It had been confusing for them to see us with other people, yet living in the same house.

The religion we had been in had stressed the value of a mother not working outside the home, but staying home with her children and spending as much time as possible teaching them. These were still a large part of my value system, and were so very hard for me to give up. I still grieve the loss of having so much time with my children. We are doing our best to adjust, though, and have discovered through experience and time, that there is no one prescription for a family in order to raise healthy children. Kids need a home, or homes, where their parents are happy, and the environment is harmonious. We achieve that by living apart by just a few miles, so that the kids remain familiar with their surroundings.

**Our personal lives are balanced,
and I can only think that we are setting
a healthy example for our children to be
true to themselves, to be honest,
and to remain loving to those in their
lives despite conflicts.**


My husband and I have achieved a new kind of relationship. We are great friends and co-parents. The kids stay half of the week with me, and half with him. We stay flexible with each other, we have dinner together and take the kids ice skating and swimming together. We still talk every day. I have a girlfriend and so does he. Our personal lives are balanced, and I can only think

that we are setting a healthy example for our children to be true to themselves, to be honest, and to remain loving to those in their lives despite conflicts. My husband fully supports my lifestyle. He has an "Equal" sticker on his Jeep. He stands up to his still narrow-minded fundamentalist Christian parents when

they talk about homosexuality being wrong. The kids are largely adjusted. They are friends with both of our girlfriends. We take special time aside to spend one-on-one with them. We also spend individual time with each of them and our girlfriends. I think that the process being so slow gave them time to adjust.

I still feel the painful after-effects of having ripped out roots that were so deeply embedded. My social status has changed from that of a heterosexual married woman to a single mother who is a lesbian. Like it or not, the negative stigmatic effects of that change still exist in our society. I get dirty looks from my daughter's Girl Scout Troop Leaders and other moms in the troop. I can only imagine what version of my story they were told and how they view me. The joys of being a stay-at-home mom are both relived and grieved every time I am with my children. I can say for sure that I realize the value of my precious time with them more than ever now, as does my husband.

He and I have both grown immensely from this experience. He has learned to find his own way without allowing his parents to guilt trip him with their version of right and wrong like they used to. He values himself



more and stands up for himself when his needs aren't being met. He takes time to pursue his own interests, as do I. And although the transplanting was an intense, difficult process, I am finally resting in the cool shade I was designed for, and he is smiling again into the warm sunshine.

**I am finally resting in the cool shade
I was designed for, and he is smiling
again into the warm sunshine.**

Eve Latchouli

I like to think of myself as constantly evolving, always following new paths that lead to my excitement and love for life. I live in a one stoplight town where my kids and I can walk two blocks in any direction to entertainment and friends. I am continually re-creating my life, to better fit my own and my children's desires for learning and happiness. I believe that variety is the spice of life, and feed on learning about the world socially, politically, psychologically, physiologically and medically.

My current source of income is a wonderful job as a postpartum doula and temporary nanny, where I use the experience I've gained through my nearly 16 years of being a mom to assist and reassure new moms that they can do this! I would love to become a writer paid to work from home so that I could allow my kids more freedom to pursue their interests, which include singing, acting, caring for dogs, online architectural games, designing and sewing costumes, 1st person shooter games with extended stories, making items from duct tape, directing and shooting videos, drawing, and so much more. Watching my kids play, learn, and grow is one of life's greatest joys!

Surrounded By Love: Our Alternative Family

We're relaxing at home on a Friday night, listening to jazz and figuring out the plan for the rest of the weekend.

"Okay, I'm taking Tristan to the soccer tournament on Sunday, right?" Brent asks. "Then we can meet you at the potluck afterwards."

"I'll be late, though, love – Bridget's last game won't be done until 4:30 or so," I reply, glancing at the online calendar. "I wish they were at the same fields this year. What were the coaches thinking? Tons of families have multiple siblings playing."

"Yikes, that's right. Who's bringing the food, then? I'm not sure we'll have time to stop back here for it."

"Honey, what time will you be back from the festival on Sunday?" I call out.

From the other room we hear, "Oh, probably three-thirty. We're playing in the morning."

"Can you grab the casserole before you go over to Mom's?"

"What's up at Mom's?" Matt asks, coming into the kitchen. He never pays attention to the schedule until he needs to, usually the day before.

"The family potluck."

"Oh, right. Sure, I can bring it. Want me to get Star, too?"

"Yes, please do! No dogs allowed at the tournaments. Not even perfectly behaved dogs, right Star?"

Hearing her name, Star leaps up, wagging and ready to leave right now. At her eager expression, a wave of laughter and warmth suffuses the room.



Matt is my husband of twenty years and the father of our two children, Tristan, age 15, and Bridget, age 13. Matt was the at-home parent for 11 years, unschooling the kids and keeping house while I worked outside the home. Now he's the primary breadwinner. Brent is my love partner of five years. He lives with us, and he and I have started a business together called Feline Dreamers. Matt also has a wonderful lady love, Ocean, who lives about an hour away. We've created an alternative family, and it works for us.

There's a whole community of folks out there with more than one long-term love interest. It even has a name – polyamory, or poly for short. Polyamory means different things depending on the beliefs and agreements of the people involved, but the basic definition, according to Wikipedia, is "the practice, desire, or acceptance of having more than one intimate relationship at a time with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved." The article goes on to say that polyamory "is grounded in concepts

such as gender equality, self-determination, choice, mutual trust, equal respect among all partners, the intrinsic value of love, and the ideal of compersion.” Compersion is a term that was created to describe the opposite of jealousy. It’s an empathic feeling of joy that you experience when seeing your beloved happy – even when that happiness comes from their involvement in another romantic relationship.

So how did I get here? It started in college. When my husband and I met, we were both in committed relationships with other people. Seeing those relationships disintegrate rather messily is what helped us found our partnership based on truth. We were done with the lying that we witnessed and participated in during that crazy year. This led us to admit that we still had other attractions, and eventually evolved to an intimate relationship with another married couple, whom I’ll call Lou and Carol.

The relationship with Lou and Carol was close for several years, although we never lived with them. The four of us started out doing a lot of spiritual work together, and that expanded gradually into love and intimacy. No one outside of the four of us knew the full nature of that relationship; we simply included Lou and Carol in our lives as our closest friends. Matt and I eventually moved three hours away, to build our home on family land, so we saw them less often, but remained close for years.

And then Matt fell in love again, with a single female friend of ours, whom I’ll call Maria. This rocked the boat – Lou and Carol became very jealous and didn’t

want him to create a relationship with her. To Matt and I, loving multiple people was about freedom and openness, but they felt that what we had was exclusive and should be guarded closely. After a year or so of painful attempts at compromise and reconciliation with Lou and Carol, the relationship we had with them broke up. It was soul-wrenching. There were times when I was ready to throw in the towel, to conclude that polyamory wasn’t worth all the heartbreak and emotional damage. Over time, though, I healed and moved on.

As it happened, shortly after Matt was free to be with her, Maria found a boyfriend who wasn’t comfortable with her being poly. She has since broken up with the boyfriend,

... polyamory is grounded in concepts such as gender equality, self-determination, choice, mutual trust, equal respect among all partners, the intrinsic value of love, and the ideal of compersion.

Compersion is a term that was created to describe the opposite of jealousy. It’s an empathic feeling of joy that you experience when seeing your beloved happy – even when that happiness comes from their involvement in another romantic relationship.

but at this point she and Matt are platonic friends, not something more. I think Matt and Maria both learned what they were meant to learn from their love relationship and moved on. After that, Matt dated another woman he met at a festival, but she lived several hours away, so the romantic part of the relationship didn’t really go anywhere. They now call each other two or three times a year and have wonderful hours-long conversations.

A year later, in 2006, I fell in love with Brent. All was well at first. I had met him through my best friend, whom I’ll

call Abbie. As Brent and I discovered the depths of our love and how well we worked together, jealousy reared its ugly head again. Abbie was jealous of the strong relationship Brent and I developed. Matt became deeply jealous too, which seemed surprising given what had happened to him a year or so before. Brent and I had found each other at a time when we had each reached more confident places on our respective spiritual paths. We wanted to explore a new world of creativity together, and yet the powerful backlash from Abbie and Matt was like a dash of icy cold water.

It felt like not only Matt, but my closest friends (mainly Abbie and her husband) were opposed to this new phase in my life. For me, my love for Brent wasn't just about him and me, but also about learning more about myself and honoring my own needs and desires. This was threatening to our close community, who had gotten used to the way things were. I was changing the role I played, from someone who put her own desires last, to someone who followed her passions and callings. I had never before been in love with someone who was like me. As the saying goes, opposites attract, and the way Matt and I relate is like the yin-yang symbol. We bring our differences to the partnership, and together we form a whole that is stronger than the sum of its parts. With Brent, I found someone who seemed to easily understand my inner life, because of his similar experiences. Here's part of a letter I wrote to Matt, Abbie, and her husband, about a year after Brent and I became lovers:

This past year, my new-found love for Brent and the way he and I work together creatively inspired and further fueled my growth into becoming (or re-finding?) myself and my unique voice in the universe. I have never before fallen in love with someone whose energy is very like mine (I

also very much enjoy the "opposites attract" love and friendship that I have experienced; I appreciate the beautiful diversity of love!). This relationship has helped me to really express the crazy weird creative ideas I have inside me, without having to worry about "defending" them or figuring out how to explain in words what I mean. He "gets" it. At the same time, this love and the intense energies involved have, from my perspective, been a catalyst for those close to me to criticize me for breaking out of my old roles. Instead of giving energy to everyone else and taking the leftovers for myself, I've allowed myself to focus on the things that are inspiring me and that lead me toward my calling. But taking time for myself and those pursuits has been threatening to those who may have found themselves relying on my old ways of being.

I think what my loved ones were afraid of was that I would abandon them somehow. They talked about me withdrawing and pushing them away. Abbie and her husband, seeing

what Matt, Brent, and I were going through, questioned my commitment to my marriage and to the rules we had been operating under before. They seemed to want me to walk away from Brent because of the strain it was putting on the relationship Matt and I had, and I just couldn't do that. To me, it was not only the love I have for Brent that was at stake, although that is a deep and enduring love, but also my very freedom. Matt seemed to be idealizing the exclusivity that he and I had chafed against when Lou and Carol preached it to us. I wasn't ready or willing to put myself back in that box, or any other.

The relationship that developed between Brent and I was very intense, and took up a lot of my attention. In our previous relationships, Matt and I had treated our marriage as our primary relationship, with our other



partnerships as secondary to what we shared between the two of us. The love I felt for Brent as a soulmate caused me to want to include him more fully in our lives, and this meant I was changing the rules. I tried to balance where I put my energy, but there never seemed to be enough to go around, especially during those early months. I was Matt's only partner at that point, and he became very demanding of my time. He and my closest friends, seeing the passion and excitement Brent and I felt for each other, felt like they were missing all the fun – even when we were all hanging out together, which mystified me. I was sad that they couldn't seem to share our joy.

We had some very rough times. Matt felt betrayed, and so did I. Brent wanted me all to himself – at first he seemed

to think he could somehow win me away from Matt, and it took him a while to become comfortable with the daily realities of a poly lifestyle. The kids were witness to our discussions, fights, tears, and recriminations. Over a period of months, we tried again and again to compromise on various details of our changing relationships. We were sailing in uncharted territory here. Matt desired rules and guidelines. Brent wanted me to be free to do whatever felt right to me in the moment. I was willing to compromise, but by this time it seemed like every choice I made was the wrong one. We would work through one problem, things would go along fine for a while, and then something else would come up. For Matt, some painful and deep-held issues within himself were brought to light. Coming from a family that was very patriarchal, he had known for years that he didn't want to be a controlling husband and father and had been creating a new model. Yet the anger that came up for him during this time led him to try and control me. He could see himself falling back on the behavior he had witnessed in his father, who had let his anger hold sway over his family. Matt chose to seek help through counseling and acupuncture.

Eventually, step by painful step, we worked through the

crisis. Matt and I were committed to our marriage, and Brent and I wanted to stay together, too, and explore our relationship and soul work. Somehow we persevered. I feel sometimes like it was my sheer stubborn belief in love that got me through, and gave us all the impetus to keep trying. Ziggy Marley came out with a song in 2006 that the three of us could easily agree on, and it became sort of a personal anthem: "Love is My Religion." It may sound corny, but it was really love that got us through those difficult times. To me, love isn't confined to an exclusive, one-on-one relationship. It means opening my heart to

those around me, and offering them my unconditional presence and support. I believe that love is limitless, and when I allow it to overcome my fears of lack and abandonment, love

lifts me up and brings me joy and peace.

These days, things are much more stable for my family. Brent moved in with us a couple of years ago. Though we need to expand our living space, and there is tension between Brent and the now-teenaged Tristan, we are a pretty typical happy family. The kids have grown up with us in our various incarnations of polyamory, so it's a part of the fabric of their lives. Matt's love partner enjoys having her own space, so he sees her two or three times a week and that works out well. They've been together three years now, and we're all very fond of her. She is such a sweetheart – she adores the food Brent and I make for her, and it's always a delight when she comes for a visit.

No one really asks, but I can see it in their eyes. Or maybe I'm just projecting my own curiosity, the way I'd feel in their place. "So, where does everyone sleep?! Is it like a big orgy, or what?" Sorry to disappoint you. No orgies, and it's more about the love than the sex. Despite a vague yearning for some ideal vision of lesbian love, I'm pretty much heterosexual. I say "pretty much," because I figure for the right person I could overlook gender. But I like men.

In our case, Matt and I share a bedroom, as we have for all the years of our marriage. Two or three times a week, I go and sleep in Brent's room, when Ocean comes to visit or Matt goes to her place. When she's here for a visit, Ocean and Matt sleep in our room. Yes, in our bed. They used to drag futon mattresses out onto the floor and stack them up, but after a while I insisted that they could just use our queen-sized bed. Often Matt would go off to work without putting away the heavy futons, and it was cramping my style. That's where I do my late-afternoon yoga!

Brent wishes I'd spend more time in his bed, but even that

experience together seems worth having to share my love with Matt, and he enjoys being part of a close-knit family. The kids are older now, and have their own busy schedules and outside activities. But we still make time to share a home-cooked dinner together most evenings, and go round the table so each of us can share something we're thankful for in that moment. In warmer weather, we go swimming and hiking, taking along a picnic lunch and, of course, Star-dog. When the weather turns cooler, we have fires in the backyard fire pit, and play card and board games around the dining room table – Skip-Bo is a current favorite, though Tristan prefers Killer Bunnies. We all enjoy fantasy and sci-fi, so when a big new film comes out, especially one based on books we all love, like the

There's no doubt that loving more than one partner
and creating a life as a family together is hard work.
We were all raised in a culture that puts monogamy on a
pedestal and at the same time glamorizes adultery.

isn't really about the sex. He loves to snuggle. Once in a while he'll mention it in a wistful tone, usually in the late evening, hoping I'll join him. But how can I leave Matt on his own for the night without hurting his feelings? These are the times when my heart feels pulled in two.

These days, Matt and Brent get along well. The resentments of a few years ago have for the most part fallen away, and they act like brothers. I've stepped back from the role I once played as "middleman," letting them communicate directly with each other, and I can see them gradually building a relationship as members of a family. They work together well, and laugh over shared jokes. I think each of them wishes they were my only partner, at times. Now and then Matt will look back to our early years together as a sort of Golden Age, and yet he wouldn't give up his relationship with Ocean, and he thanks me for opening up the possibility for him to share this deep love with her. Brent has gradually modified his ideal type of relationship, moving away from a rigid desire for monogamy. The love, friendship, and creativity we

final Harry Potter movie or the latest installment in the Narnia series, we head to the cinema together. During the winter, we dive into fantasy role-playing games (yes, old-school style, with dice and graph paper) and have fun solving mysteries and exploring dungeons. We have family movie nights at home, and I still read aloud, though not as regularly as we did when the kids were younger. Although there are times when any one of us can be irritating or annoyed, we know we can count on each other, for anything from advice and a shoulder to cry on, to gales of laughter at an impromptu ticklefest.

There's no doubt that loving more than one partner and creating a life as a family together is hard work. We were all raised in a culture that puts monogamy on a pedestal and at the same time glamorizes adultery. Just watch one of the afternoon soaps for about ten minutes, and you'll see how our collective story about love and romance unfolds. Those beliefs lurk in our individual psyches, often buried deeply until they are challenged. Just imagine yourself catching a glimpse of your lover in a soulful kiss with

someone else, and see how quickly the green-eyed monster of jealousy shows its fangs.

It takes a lot of dedicated practice to release those old patterns, to discover a new way of experiencing life and love. Even if you are polyamorous, or feel inclined in that direction, in practice you will probably be challenged in ways you don't expect. Matt often paraphrases from one of the books he read about polyamorous relationships, "Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits" by Deborah M. Anapol, which states that if you're not willing to process your issues externally, then polyamory is probably not for you. What the author is referring to is the hours of (often intense) discussions necessary to make a complex web of relationships work for everyone involved.

Ideally, decisions are made by group consensus, and any boundaries are set up with respect to the needs of all the people involved. Open communication is essential. Over the years, we've found that it's important to honor the emotions that come up (like jealousy, anger, and sorrow) yet to not let them limit you or others. Each person needs time to work through his or her own feelings, but it's not productive to use them to blame or control others. This can be tricky, as we've all been taught in this culture to rely on others to satisfy our needs. But I think that as we all strive to become more conscious individuals, we develop stronger and healthier relationships with one another, and that ripples outward to our other relationships, with friends and extended family.

For me, a main benefit of polyamory is the freedom to be who I am and to choose whom I share my life with. As human beings, we seek connections with others, and deepen those connections based on many factors: chemistry, energy, the stories of our pasts, shared interests, future goals, and much more. Not every strong connection will contain elements of romantic love and sexuality, but some will. Why limit those connections? Polyamory is similar to unschooling in that regard. Unschooling involves all the elements of living and learning, and if your child wishes to take a class about something that they love, they are free to do so. But that

doesn't mean that they must finish that class, or that it will be the only method they use, or that they will have just one teacher on the subject. Freedom in regard to relationships, and in building the families and communities that work for us, is part of rethinking every aspect of our lives. Of course, like unschooling, polyamory won't appeal to everyone. The key is to be authentic and to nurture and strengthen your inner self.

How does our community accept our alternative family situation? For the most part, our families and close friends have a matter-of-fact attitude. That's just how we are, they can see that it works for us, and it's none of their business. Of course, none of them are straight-laced religious types to begin with. We hang out, not surprisingly, with lots of liberals, artists, unschoolers, and eccentrics.

My side of the family in particular is very "live and let live." Several of them I haven't even told outright what's going on, but just left them to figure it out as they will. They're big on adopting folks into the extended family, and our monthly potlucks include everyone.

Brent is there, laughing at the inside jokes, sharing the bread he bakes, and exchanging recipes. Ocean brings flowers for the hostess, raves over the gourmet food, and pitches in to do dishes. They're accepted as part of the clan. Some of my family members might be surprised when they read this article, but I doubt it. They're pretty savvy. As Brent's mom put it, "I was around in the sixties. I know what you're talking about."



Those who don't approve, for whatever reason, either keep it to themselves or don't stick around. I haven't discussed it with my dad, who generally thinks we're weird anyway. He doesn't approve of homeschooling, for example, but mostly doesn't talk about it. Yet he saves returnable bottles for our homeschool group, faithfully dropping them off at the supermarket every week. And he, like my mom and the others, has accepted Brent and Ocean as part of the crew.

Sadly, my best woman friend Abbie and I parted ways a couple of years ago. It seems that Abbie didn't approve of us, for many reasons. I think part of it was that she felt excluded and a bit envious. And our family didn't fit neatly into a box that she could give her stamp of approval. The ending of the friendship was complex and painful, but I feel like it began when Brent and I started to get really close. There are others who have drifted away, too, those who don't get it and feel uncomfortable around us. In the wider community, we often "pass" for a more typical modern family. I'm sure many of the soccer moms and dads think that Matt and I are divorced but still friendly, and assume Brent is the step-dad. I admit to taking advantage of the fact that most people are too caught up in their own family lives to really notice where ours is different. And since the kids don't go to school, they don't really have the peer pressure to "be like everyone else."



of our close friends now, and our differences have become merely a part of the fabric of our shared community. The tribe of kids, mostly teens and a few pre-teens, seem equally at ease discussing music with Matt and playing X-Box with Brent.

One of the most interesting things about this whole experience is that most of the other folks Matt and I have been involved with over the years haven't been self-identified as poly. None of us really set out with the intention to have multiple partners. But we, and they, have followed the path of love, and this is where we find ourselves today. We're still working on it, and it is certainly not perfect, but we each recognize that we are a work in progress, and we realize that love is the most important thing to us. The kids, although they've certainly seen the tough times, are also growing up knowing that they don't have to box up their love in traditional packages. They have a variety of close adults to rely on, and a close-knit family to cheer them on at soccer games or bring them a "just-because-I-was-thinking-of-you" gift. I think their concept of family is broader than that of many of their peers.

Ultimately, we are each on this spiritual journey alone.
That may sound scary or intimidating, but to me,
it's extraordinarily freeing.

The members of our homeschool group, which has been meeting weekly for over a decade, accept us for who we are. They are open-minded unschoolers for the most part, and our group includes vegetarians, teenage bisexuals, actors, working moms, farmers, and people with many other varied interests. A few years ago, the mom of a new family was confused when she heard Matt refer openly to his girlfriend, then introduce me as his wife. But she's one

Allowing myself to open to love in many dimensions has been an amazing experience. It's a deeply-held part of my belief system that love is the energy we're all made of, and that it underlies the entirety of existence. There are many types of love, and not every flirtation will turn into a romantic partnership. But there's always that possibility of deep connection, and being open to what happens is a joyful and enlivening experience.

Living this way challenged me to grow in many new directions. One of the most profound is my discovery of self-love and presence.

Ultimately, we are each on this spiritual journey alone. That may sound scary or intimidating, but to me, it's extraordinarily freeing. We are all immersed in love, like fish in water.

When we are open to our connection with ourselves and the universe, we can swim through our days with awareness and joy, knowing that everything changes. Love and relationships evolve over time, and rather than cling to that which makes me comfortable, I can go with the flow – on the good days, anyway. I return to love, over and over again, and experience its multiple forms and expressions.

It's a spiritual practice, and I'm so very thankful for my beloved co-creators.



*In the photo above, left to right:
Brent, Nikki, Matt, Bridget, Tristan*

(Ocean chose not to be photographed and is represented by the mask)

Nikki Shields

is a freelance writer and licensed clergy member.

She has been writing about spirituality and personal growth for many years. Nikki has studied Buddhism and Eastern philosophy, yoga, Earth-based religions, Tarot, and Reiki healing. She received her B.A. in Broadcasting and English from the University of Maine, and refined her writing and editing skills during a 16-year career in public radio. She writes a blog called Starcat's Study, which can be found at starcatsstudy.blogspot.com. Nikki's other interests include yoga, meditation, reading, hiking, creative vegetarian and vegan cooking, and drumming. She

is the co-author of the "30-Day Core Belief Kit," and is currently writing an e-book about developing a daily spiritual practice. She co-owns a business called

Feline Dreamers, which can be found at www.felinedreamers.com.

She enjoys unschooling with her two kids. Nikki lives with her amazing family in southern Maine.

Loved is a Person

My family left Israel for the U.S. in 1974, when I was eight. Every summer until I was grown, I went to visit with my maternal aunt's family. Her children—my cousins—and I were very close, although their family was devoutly Orthodox while mine was as secular as you can get. Each summer, I hung out with my close-in-age girl cousins, leaving my liberal B'nai B'rith youth group in Rochester for the religious, gender-segregated B'nai Akiva summer scout activities in Jerusalem.

I must have been 14 the summer the girls refused to join me at the “mixed” pool so as not to expose their bodies to men. Which is why I was at the Jerusalem Hilton Hotel pool with my 10-year-old boy cousin, Haim. As we dressed to leave the pool, I was still blown away that the little kid I'd never much noticed had gone along with my “let's sneak in without paying” scheme as though he did that kind of thing all the time. I grabbed my skirt off the back of the deck chair and pulled it on over my swimsuit. Haim put on shorts and a t-shirt, using his left hand to do the work that his right, injured at birth because of a doctor's error, could not do. I noticed, but did not comment, on the fact that he didn't replace the yarmulke he had taken off to swim.

I had a startling thought, which I remember as clearly today as if I were still sitting on that plastic pool chair on that hot, dusty Jerusalem afternoon. The thought was: “He's going to be my favorite, forever. And he's going to be a rebel—no doubt about it.” Haim now thinks this is a funny story, because he remembers the pool but doesn't remember the yarmulke part, which ended badly when his ultra-religious private school teacher happened to board the bus and saw his bare head sitting next to an immodestly dressed teenaged girl (me). He reached that strong left hand into his shorts pocket fast as lightning

and threw the yarmulke on, quickly fastening its attached bobby pin.

Although our time at the pool marks the beginnings of our friendship, I had, of course, known him his whole life. I saw him all those summers: the sweet toddler with long, golden-curls (which were cut off, in the Orthodox tradition, when he was three); the annoying little brother pestering us older girls. But I have another, earlier memory of Haim, too. It is, perhaps, my own first memory.

I was four, dressed in my favorite green dress and red patent-leather party shoes. Standing in the courtyard of an old Jerusalem building, my girl cousins and I watched the action inside. The party, we knew, was a celebration of Haim's birth, and the festivities were well underway. We had a large family, and he was the first male grandchild, the prodigal son. Music played, and men in black coats danced around the room. Someone called us in, and the dancers began to throw candy high in the air. My cousins and I ran through the room, collecting candy in the fronts of our dresses. At some point, the children were sent outside again. I sat on a low stone wall in the courtyard and closed my eyes, savoring the sticky sweet-and-sour combination in my mouth. My ears were filled with the din of adult voices raised in celebration. But suddenly, an

unexpected noise jolted me: the sound of a baby crying. Not seeing my cousins, I followed the sound to the silky white bassinet set in the corner of the room. It must have been as tall as I, because I had to reach up on my tiptoes to see in. And the sight shocked me. There in the white bed was my tiny new cousin, wailing at the top of his lungs. At his midsection, a white cloth diaper was soaked in a widening circle of blood. I turned to get help, but no one paid any attention. It came



to me with a start that it wasn't that they hadn't heard, it was that they knew and didn't care. In my child's mind, I realized that in some major way, the sweetness of the candy, the music, the dancing, and the grownups' joy was not in spite of, but because of, the bleeding infant in the bassinet.

Years after the swimming pool incident, when Haim gave up the yarmulke for good, he was serving as a tank commander in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Because of the bad right arm, the military didn't want to put him into combat when he was drafted. But Haim, a proud Israeli boy raised on stories of heroic self-defense, wanted to serve where it counted. He fought the bureaucracy, and hard, for his right to do so. He finally won. I was vaguely aware of his life, but at that time I was busy living a hellacious first marriage and sometimes following the Grateful Dead. Israel and my cousins were far away.

Haim served during the (first) Intifada, and by the next time we met, in 1995, he was not a boy at all, but a 26-year-old man, and I was a jaded but much happier divorced woman. Over drinks, cigarettes, and calamari—in a Jerusalem bar! On Shabbat! How times change!—he told me about his service and about the Intifada. Yitzhak Rabin had just been assassinated by a young Orthodox man opposed to the peace process, and the country was reeling, grief mixed with continued

hope for the process. My body warmed by glasses of red wine, I felt my heart fill with pride and love for Haim as he talked about the growing peace movement. He was so passionate and optimistic. He told me the Intifada was like Israel's Viet Nam, that it had taught the country that occupation would not work. He had already refused to serve his twice-yearly reserve duty in the territories, unwilling to "shoot rubber bullets at children," as he put it. At that time, his refusal was by personal request; he asked his commanders, and they assigned him elsewhere. I remember that Jerusalem night clearly, his steady arm around me as we walked home through ancient streets, and I remember thinking: "I was right about him, all those years ago!"

And then I went back to my life and he to his. Jewish-American friends were shocked at my story. How could an Israeli refuse to serve his country? Israel was "ours," the Palestinians (and the Arab nations that supported them) were the enemy, trying to wipe us out as the Nazis almost had. These friends were hesitant about the peace process underway at the time and continued to support Israel unilaterally with their voices and their money, answering my questions by reminding me once and again that supporting Israel is "what Jewish people do."

The Oslo Accords happened, and peace did not come. I saw my cousin Haim twice in the interim. He came all the way to Alabama for my second wedding, and then he let my new husband and me stay at his place on our Israeli honeymoon in late 1998.

A few months later, I was pregnant with my first child. We chose not to find out the gender, to be surprised. Reading through my pregnancy and childbirth books, I reached the part about newborn circumcision, and something didn't seem right. I didn't connect my discomfort with my cousin at that time, though I still held the memory of that long-ago party. But I began to research the practice of circumcision, and the more I read, the more I questioned. I knew that circumcision had been part of Judaism since its beginnings, since Abraham circumcised his son in exchange for God's promise. But now I read that even in those times, only a small piece of the foreskin was removed, far different from today's practice. It turns

out that through the ages, the ritual has not always been practiced by Jews (even Moses, who brought us the Ten Commandments, did not circumcise his son, I was surprised to learn). And I now knew that contrary to popular belief, a boy must not be circumcised to be Jewish. According to Jewish law, he must simply be born of a Jewish mother.

Also contrary to common wisdom, circumcision is not a routine, safe and relatively painless procedure. The foreskin is not merely an “extra” piece of skin; it serves to protect the glans from abrasion and keeps it in its natural state: a sensitive mucus membrane—not the dry, thick one it becomes on a circumcised penis.

In the Jewish tradition of Brit Milah, the Mohel first inserts a probe around the glans, to separate the foreskin from it. He then pulls the foreskin through a clamp,

that is “what Jewish people do”?

My husband and I decided against circumcision if our child was to be a boy. Our daughter was born January 9, 2000. We named her Anna—for Anna Gabriel, my great-grandmother, who died in the Holocaust.

While Anna was enjoying the first year of life in the peaceful suburbs of America, the second Intifada began in Israel/Palestine. Haim and I kept in touch sporadically. He called me long-distance several times during my complicated second pregnancy; he called again to comfort me when my daughter, Erika, was born and died on May 6, 2001. And then, almost a year later, he called once more. This time, he needed a favor.

The situation in the territories had deteriorated further, enough that a group of 50 IDF reservists and combat

*Circumcision, whether performed in a hospital or by a Mohel,
can cause myriad complications, including infection,
hemorrhage, surgical injury, or even death.*

squeezing and cutting it off (alternately, the procedure can be completed with a knife and no clamp, allowing for no protection for the glans and for the religiously required bleeding). I realized, as I read, that this was what had happened to my wailing cousin that day we celebrated his birth.

Circumcision, whether performed in a hospital or by a Mohel, can cause myriad complications, including infection, hemorrhage, surgical injury, or even death. With all these facts—even the American Association of Pediatrics official policy does not advocate routine infant circumcision—how could it be that secular Jews, those of us who don’t keep kosher, don’t pray Jewish prayers, don’t attend synagogue or keep the Sabbath, how could it be that this is the one practice we all still adhere to? With so many laws of Biblical times long since discarded (animal sacrifices, stoning, polygamy) why did we keep this one thing? Something we do to our helpless sons, without their permission, without much forethought at all, because

soldiers had written “The Combatants’ Letter.” The letter states, in part, that they would henceforth “not continue to fight this War of the Settlements...not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.”

Haim had signed the letter and became active in the group, Courage to Refuse. He told me that out of respect for his commanding officer and his men, he had written his own letter to explain his actions. He needed my help in translating the letter into English so he could submit it to the UK’s Guardian of London newspaper.

I quickly learned that speaking two languages does not make you a translator. Getting the words right, along with the tone and intent, took almost a week, as well as help from my father and extensive use of the Hebrew-English dictionary. I was humbled to help him. He had put his livelihood and his freedom on the line to do what was right; all I had to give was a few words. I hope I did justice

to the passion of his Hebrew letter when I wrote:

“...By including the concept of ‘a clearly illegal command’ in the code of military law, [Israel] has obliged its soldiers to refuse to carry out orders that are immoral or opposed to the values on which a democracy is based...The most critical question that arises is ‘what exactly is an illegal command?’...An order to fire on a child standing before a roadblock is clearly illegal. But if the order is to shoot above his head to chase him from the roadblock, does the emotional damage the shooting causes the child make the order illegal? Is it illegal to continually enter Palestinian citizens’ homes in the middle of the night? Is it illegal to prevent the free movement of Palestinian citizens? Aren’t the searches, the humiliation, our many mistakes, an indication that our treatment of the Palestinian population under our rule is clearly illegal?”

Military law does not define what a clearly illegal order is, but leaves it to the soldier. My interpretation of the law...includes any command that, when obeyed, leads to humiliating human beings, robbing them of self-respect, and depriving them of the basic human rights protected under the UN declaration of human rights, a document signed by Israel...

Prohibiting Palestinians from travelling along roads without providing alternative routes, the never-ending delays at roadblocks, the many hours required to travel short distances, the humiliation, the destruction of homes, the incessant searches, the need to aim weapons at innocent women and children—all these actions turn the Israeli Defense Force into an immoral occupying force, and in these I refuse to participate...

In addition to the great harm we are causing daily to Palestinians, we damage ourselves as a society. Our society is based on moral precepts in Judaism, which states that ‘loved is a person created in God’s image.’ Instead, we are raising a generation of violent young people immune to pain



and human suffering, a generation who don’t see in the Palestinian a human being, only part of a mass to be avoided and feared.”

The translated letter was published in the Guardian of London May 6, 2002, which would have been my daughter Erika’s first birthday.

I had another, healthy, baby girl, Ellie, in 2003. We were once again spared the pressure, the unsolicited comments, and the derision that would have come had we had to explain our anti-circumcision stance.

Then, in 2007, we adopted a boy, Sasha, who came to us from Russia intact, just as God had created him. I have learned in the adoption community that, most often, American parents (Jewish or not) circumcise their internationally adopted children. When Sasha first came to us, he was two. In the first year or so after he arrived,

when I dressed him at the pool or changed his diaper in a public restroom, I often saw shock, even revulsion, in people's faces as a response to my beautiful boy's body. Their eyes (and sometimes mouths) told me this wasn't what they expected, or approved of. My son is two years older now, and my rebellion of refusing to cut him is no longer seen or commented on by others.

In the meantime, the fight continues for the soldiers in Israel who refuse. Six hundred twenty-eight have signed

in courage and hope, a lesson my cousin continues to teach me. If Judaism is based on the moral precept that "loved is a person created in God's image," then it is our duty to speak up, to refuse to inflict pain on the innocent, because we are all created in God's image.

In response to his protest, the IDF simply stopped calling Haim for reserve duty. My cousin is now a professor, husband, and father of three girls. He says he's glad he was able to avoid having to make the circumcision decision

*... my Jewish identity can't exist apart from my belief that
God made our sons' bodies perfect the day they are born.*

the original Courage to Refuse petition. Many others have less publicly refused. The support petition has almost 15,000 signatures to date. More than 280 members of Courage to Refuse have been court-martialed and jailed for their refusal, although the Israeli government can only make examples of a few, lest it be known that thousands of its own citizens are imprisoned in protest against its policies. That truth might be a little too much for even the most loyal Jewish Americans to hear.

It makes me sad for myself and for all of us when Jewish Americans do not stand against inflicting pain in the name of Judaism. Too many of us, even progressives who question so much, turn a blind eye when it comes to the accepted Jewish-American worldview, as if any questioning, any disloyalty, would just provide an opening for a past, present, or future enemy. For me, my Jewish identity can't exist apart from my belief that God made our sons' bodies perfect the day they are born. And my love for the beautiful land where I was born (my family, the warm desert breeze, the rows of eucalyptus trees, the noise, the candor, the people who look like me) cannot exist apart from facing these truths about atrocities being committed in the name of "my" homeland.

This is a story, partly, of helplessness: as a child I could not lessen my cousin's pain. As an adult, I could do no more than give him some English words. And I feel helpless to stop the Israeli occupation, or the practice of routine infant circumcision. But for me, this story is also a lesson

himself. He surprised me by saying he thinks it is because of that brutality, not despite it, that fathers continue to subject their sons to this rite of passage into Jewish manhood. I imagine that having seen men inflict violence on the helpless much more often and up close than I have, he may unfortunately be right in this regard. Haim is still active in the peace movement and is a member of the joint Israeli/Palestinian group Combatants for Peace. He and his Palestinian "enemies" have put down their weapons to talk, get to know each other as human beings, and promote peace. Many years after he accompanied me to the Hilton Hotel pool, he has truly become not just my favorite, but my hero.

Osie Gabriel

learned at a Rethinking Everything conference that the best way to help children make their dreams come true is to follow your own. In her family of six, it takes some juggling, but they make time for individual and family adventures. Osie will be going to Palestine as part of a peace delegation in May and will speak about what she witnesses at RE 2012. Donations to her Interfaith Peace

Builders delegation are much needed and gratefully accepted via PayPal to: peacefulRAWvolution at gmail dot com. ALL Money collected WILL be donated directly to IFPB for her travel. Send her an email for information about making a tax-deductible donation directly to IFPB.

finally,

we'd love your comments on this issue's stories. Email us at publishers@rethinkingeverythingmagazine.net.

If you've not yet subscribed for **FREE** to our two sister publications, we invite you to do so now!



Rethinking Everything **PARENT** magazine publishes on April 1
www.remagazineparent.com



Rethinking Everything **LIFE** magazine publishes on May 1
www.remagazinelifelife.com

Do you have a story of deeply transformative change you'd like us to publish?

Send it our way! We'd love to read it, consider it for publication and even help you write it if writing is not your thing.

Email us at publishers@rethinkingeverythingmagazine.net.

Our 16th international conference on Rethinking Everything is in the planning stages now.

Labor Day Weekend in 2012, August 30 - September 4 in Irving, Texas, USA.

Visit www.rethinkingeverything.net for ongoing details which will begin in February, and sign up there to receive conference updates. We'd love to have you participate with a revolutionary session or activity.

Email Barb with your ideas! barb@rethinkingeverything.net.



www.rethinkingeverything.net

Modern men and women
are obsessed with the sexual;
it is the only realm of primordial adventure
still left to most of us.

Like apes in a zoo,
we spend our energies on the
one field of play remaining;
human lives otherwise are pretty well caged
in by the walls, bars, chains, and locked gates
of our industrial culture.

Edward Abbey