

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / Dan Savage on Where the Sexual Revolution Went Wrong

I'm Ezra Klein, this is the Ezra Klein Show.

How do you introduce Dan Savage?

I think it's fair, I think it's maybe inarguable to say he's the most important sex advice columnist in the country and has been for a long time.

There's a good profile of him in Slate from a bit back that wrote, quote, in the three decades since the column debuted, Savage Love, which is the name of his sex advice column, has morphed from a crude stunt into the most important text in contemporary American sexual ethics.

I think that's right, the most important text in contemporary American sexual ethics.

But what's so important about it, I think, is that Savage in his columns and in his podcast, the Savage Love cast, has been this crucial bridge between the gay, queer, and straight communities at a time when sexual and relational norms in all of them are changing and cross-pollinating.

And this has been a time of a lot of change and a lot of cross-pollination.

I think it is hard, if you're just living through this, as we all are, to really step back and recognize how different things have become in such a short period of time, legal, not just legal, constitutional same-sex marriage, the rise of app-based dating, which I don't think we've really apprehended how different that is, to completely turn around the fundamental question of dating from scarcity to abundance, at least abundance of choices of not always people, much more openness, in part due to Savage, towards various forms of ethical non-monogamy.

We're seeing so much more fluidity and possibility and freedom, and that has come with a lot of anxiety and unhappiness and second guessing.

You would think we'd be in this space of unbelievable sexual and relational abundance, and instead people are talking about sex recessions.

App-based dating may have given people more choice, but are they happier?

Are their relationships stronger?

It doesn't seem so, and I think the tension here is that we now have the freedom to live our sexual and relational lives really differently, but I'm not sure that we have, or that many of us have, the skills or the expectations or the communication needed to navigate that freedom smoothly.

And in a way, I've always thought that's really the deeper topic Savage writes about.

Sex is sort of a weight into that for him.

So I wanted to bring him on the show to discuss it.

As always, my email is reclineshowatandmytimes.com.

Dan Savage, what a pleasure to have you on the show.

I'm shocked to be here.

I like that.

That's how I want people to feel when we begin.

So I want to start with a bit of grand sweep.

You've been writing, I think, the most important sex and probably relationship advice column in America for 30 years.

What are the biggest changes in that period to you in our sexual and relational landscape?

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When I started writing *Savage Love* in 1991, kink wasn't as widely understood, gender wasn't as widely understood, and the possibility of structuring your own relationships in a way that worked for you rather than in a way that worked for your parents or grandparents wasn't something that straight people had embraced.

And I'm gay, and one of the things that was unique about *Savage Love* when I started writing it was it was sex advice for straight people written by a gay dude, and I got a lot of angry letters in the first couple of years from people projecting onto me as a gay person, their ignorance of gay people as straight people, like they didn't know anything about gay people or gay relationships, and they just assumed I would know nothing about straight people and straight relationships as if my parents weren't straight, as if my siblings weren't straight, as if I didn't fake being straight for a while and didn't make a very close study of what a straight person acted like, wanted and did in an attempt to pass myself as straight, gay people know what straight people are like.

And if there's been any change in the last 30 years that I think is the most significant is this great kind of cultural cross-pollination between gay life and straight life that really drove home that things we thought of as particular to gay communities, gay subcultures, gay life were not choices gay people were making, and a lot of things that we associated with straight people, straight life, were not choices that straight people were freely making.

And once people were more free to make their own choices, a lot of gay people acted a lot more straight, and a lot of straight people began to act a lot more gay.

We've been thinking to pull back the curtain on this a bit about doing a relationships episode for a while, and what keeps tripping us up is that most relationship books are bad.

And one of the reasons I was excited when we thought of having you on is that, one, I realize that a lot of just the language people use around me now comes from you, comes from your column, comes from your readers, you know, Monogamish and GGG and all these things you've brought to the discourse, but beyond that, something that I think you've had a huge influence on is being this bridge from gay and queer and kink culture to straight dating culture.

In a way that has actually made, at least this is I moved to San Francisco, I see it much more straight dating culture, very different.

What are some of those differences?

We've talked that you mentioned that there was this kind of bridge that opened up, but what came over it?

The idea that monogamy is a choice a couple makes and a choice a couple can revisit that monogamy shouldn't be a default setting.

It should be something that you opt into and cannot opt out of over the life of a relationship.

When I first came out as gay and began to meet gay couples, I was surprised, you know, I moved into dating and relationships with expectations and wants that had been handed to me and I was surprised by the numbers of gay couples I met who were writing their own script and doing their own thing and at first I found that threatening and I got used to it and then I saw the logic and the utility of it in that you should do what works for you and what for you too is a couple and that should be a conversation.

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I think that's primarily what came over it.

I don't think everybody is monogamish or open now.

If there's anything that I've really tried to hammer home over the years is to attack these myths, these lies that were told when we're children that being in love means you aren't going to want to sleep with anybody else.

Not true.

Being in love if you've made a monogamous commitment might mean you don't sleep with anybody else out of respect for your partner and the choice you made and the choice you made together, but you're still going to want to sleep with somebody else and expecting that other person to pretend they don't want to sometimes that they aren't tempted and getting angry whenever you stumble over evidence that your partner might be attracted to somebody

else, which isn't me giving permission to people to be insensitive or cruel about sometimes finding other people attractive if you're in an exclusive relationship, but it's such an engine of conflict.

That's what I began to see when I first started getting a lot of letters from straight people that these expectations that love meant you didn't sleep with anybody else at all true and lasting relationships were monogamous relationships.

It created so much stress and tension and wound up ending a lot of really good relationships and imperfect ones and monogamy was sort of my hobby horse.

Monogamy is literally the only thing humans attempt where perfection is the only metric of success.

You should meet some vegans.

Well, I guess there's bad too.

Sorry.

I met a few.

We have some for Christmas Eve dinner every year.

It's very complicated.

Perfection is your measure of success.

You're setting yourself up for failure and disappointment in a committed long-term sexually exclusive relationship.

The world's greatest chef sometimes burns an omelet.

Still the world's greatest chef, Sean White is the world's greatest snowboarder, has fallen down and gotten up and still been Sean White world's greatest snowboarder.

If you're with somebody for 50 years and you find out they cheated on you once, they were terrible at monogamy, they failed at monogamy, they never loved you, it wasn't a real relationship.

We believe these things and then they destroy not open relationships.

They destroy monogamous relationships that are imperfect as all relationships are.

If there's any windmill I tilted against that I feel like I knocked over, it was that one.

I was looking at a poll preparing for this that I thought was both kind of funny and revealing.

You got a poll from 2020 and it found that 12% of adults said they'd had some kind of sexual experience outside their partnership with their partner's consent, which is higher

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than I thought it would be actually and 18% said they'd had a sexual experience outside their partnership without their partner's consent.

We know in polling people are not going to admit to that in full numbers, so it's probably higher.

It's not just that there is monogamy and non-monogamy, but there's also the shade of people who say

they're monogamous and aren't.

Yeah.

People doing what they need to do sometimes to stay married and stay sane.

Everybody looks at that and it's suddenly white hats and black hats and the person who cheated is a terrible person.

I like what Esther Perel has said, that sometimes the victim of the affair is not the victim of the marriage.

I also like what I've said, that sometimes cheating is the least worst option for all people involved.

Whenever I say I'm the guy who sometimes gives people permission to cheat, a lot of people jump down my throat because they just think that must be awful, and then a lot of the examples that I cite, things that have come up in my column, are someone who's in a long term committed relationship with a person who is chronically ill and the sexual part of their relationship has ended.

Is it the right thing to tell the person who wants to have sex outside that relationship that's about care and nurturing and commitment, but not about sex anymore?

Am I supposed to tell that person, well, do the right thing and leave.

Do the right thing and get a divorce.

Don't slip out to discreetly get a sexual need met so that you can be there fully for your partner and not resent your partner for how deprived you feel of any sexual outlet.

Go do that discreetly and then be there.

That's me somehow being against relationships, against commitment, and that's me wrestling with reality that life is long and that sometimes contingencies have to be made.

I would just say in that 18%, everyone's going to hear that figure and think, oh, these serial adulterers, oh, these awful people lying and cheating and running around behind their partner's backs.

If you're in my position where you get a lot of letters and emails and calls from people who are in very difficult circumstances where they have a very human reptile brain need, that they're kind of going crazy and it's harming their relationship that this need is unmet, I think represented in that 18% figure to a very significant degree, but when we talk about the 18% who've slept with somebody else without their partner's consent, what we see are CADs and what we see are terrible people, we see cheaters as they're presented to us in film and television and novels and realities are very different.

I don't think I've ever known anybody cheating on their partner and not that they so often admitted to me where they were happy, which is just, it speaks a little bit to your point.

I mean, I'm maybe a bit more of a moralist on this than you may have not fully absorbed the savage wisdom, but I've been a confidant on situations like this before and they're

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always very tough.

People sometimes are not, I do want to say sometimes people are not doing what they need to do, they're just doing what they would like to do, but oftentimes these things are in context where my advice is, well, you guys should have broken up, but it's very easy to be outside of a relationship saying that everything that has been built should be ended. And inside relationships, it's much more complicated and how people got to a point where they're sort of miserably unable to talk about their own unhappiness with each other and trying to find too much outside is, I mean, often the tragedy and to Pearl's point, the crimes occurred before, this is a culmination.

Yes, and the need, you know, sex is bigger than we are, and we pretend that we're in control of sex and we're in charge of sex.

Sex built us and is building whatever comes after us through the processes of natural selection and spontaneous mutation.

Here we are, and we like to pretend that we get to define sex, I think we negotiate with sex from a position of relative powerlessness and it has to be channeled, it can't be damned up.

And that includes sexual desire, which is a lot, you know, about a lot more than sex, even in the context of a committed relationship.

I'm not against monogamy.

This is usually when somebody jumps up to say you're against monogamy, I'm in a long term committed, open relationship, we're approaching our third decade together, and I still get people who are monogamists who will say to my face, well, I couldn't do what you and Terry do because I value commitment too highly.

And I look at them and like, how many decades do we have to be together before we get some credit for commitment?

I always think sex is a word here that obscures so much more than it reveals.

I do when people talk about men, where it's like sex is just as if you need to play basketball once a week to, you know, get your, get your energy out where particularly in relationships and in long relationships, what people want, it often seems to me is much more complicated. Sex is this stand in or this way people are finding the feeling of being desired or of desire or of novelty or of love and security and different kinds produce completely different things.

Right.

This is a big ester pearl point of this kind of competition between the need for security and the need for novelty, but it always seemed to me we have this discourse about sex as if simply having sex as if you can tally it up on a little, you know, marker sheet where people have a lot of trouble in my experience saying what needs they actually need fulfilled because they've not typically given a lot of language for like what's behind that gigantic thing blotting out the son of emotional needs that we always talk about instead.

Given that those two things, sexual and emotional needs can be on parallel tracks, but they're on separate tracks and just the freedom to acknowledge that in the context of a committed relationship can make it easier to be in a committed relationship.

I'm not the enemy of monogamy.

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I see the benefits of monogamy for many people around sexual exclusivity, fraternal security, protection from sexually transmitted infections.

There are advantages to monogamy.

There are advantages to some degree of permitted controlled sexual freedom in the context of a committed relationship.

But I recognize that you have his own of erotic autonomy and so do I.

And to not try to control that, to create some space and freedom inside the relationship for that makes that less of a potentially damaging chaos agent that could destroy the relationship.

There's a really interesting study out of the Netherlands looking at marriage.

Netherlands is the place that's had marriage equality for the longest, gay marriage for the longest.

And interestingly, they found, despite people's assumptions, that gay male couples were the least likely to divorce.

Straight couples were more likely.

Lesbian couples most likely.

Lesbian couples and straight couples most likely to be monogamous.

Gay couples least likely to be monogamous.

Unique causation.

But it would seem that gay male couples are doing something right by diffusing the bomb that explodes so many straight and lesbian relationships, which is this desire for outside sexual contact, for autonomous sexual experiences, for the affirmation of your desirability by others whose job it isn't to affirm your desirability.

And that can redound to the benefit of your committed relationship to your primary partnership.

And you look at this study and you read it and you think, well, maybe gay couples are doing something right here.

And I think as more gay people have come out, more straight people have gotten to know the gay people that they knew or gotten to know gay people they didn't know, they've seen that at work in our relationships.

And more straight people have at least entertained the thought of there being different possibilities, which in a way, ironically, is the stated fear of social conservatives from the 70s and 80s when I was a kid, that gay people led these hedonistic lifestyles and straight people were going to be tempted to adopt gay hedonistic lifestyles.

And we've kind of seen that come to pass.

It's just straight people took everything gay people were doing and gave it new names.

I don't know if I can swear on your podcast, but gay people had tricks and fuck buddies and straight people renamed that as brands with benefits and hooking up.

There's just so much from gay culture that straight people just adopted wholesale and renamed.

And that was what Jerry Falwell Sr., who would be very shocked at Jerry Falwell Jr.'s behavior, was worried about and it came true.

We've been talking a bit about unhappiness that afflicts married or long-term committed partnerships.

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But one of the motivations for this chat for me has been that there's been this spate of books over the past couple of years with names like bad sex and rethinking sex and the right to sex.

And I've done podcasts with some of these people like Amir Srinivasan and Maggie Nelson and Erica Bakiaki.

There's an interesting moment here of questioning where the sexual revolution got us and particularly

questioning where it has left people, not so much in committed partnerships, but who are struggling with this kind of expansive freedom to not be in committed partnerships.

And I'm curious of your sense of that.

What's behind a lot of the discontent right now and how do you read it?

I read Right to Sex.

I also read The Writer for the Washington Post.

Christine Emba.

You had her on my show, Rethinking Sex and Provocation.

It is interesting.

I have felt for, you know, I'm sort of identified with the sex positivity movement.

And I've never really tossed that term around a lot to describe myself or what I do.

I was really thrilled to read all the way through Christine Emba's book, Rethinking Sex and get to a place where she quoted something I said that was basically there needs to be a limiting principle.

You can have sex with too many people, you can have sex too often and that can do a kind of, puts you at a greater physical risk and can do a kind of psychic damage.

I've never been the solution for everybody's unhappiness is just for everybody to have more and tons and lots of different partners.

I'm kind of, I think less a part of the sex positivity movement, the Mary Poppins idea that enough is as good as a feast.

You know, these books are being written by women.

A lot of the young feminists that are written about in the right to sex who are reevaluating and rethinking and embracing writers like Andrea Dworkin are women and young women who find the sexual marketplace to be dehumanizing.

And that may be an element of the current sex culture that there needs to be a correction for counter reformation, maybe.

I think when sex is bad, odds are it was worse for bad for the woman.

So it doesn't surprise me that a lot of these books were written by women and I think the critique in these books about a lot of what's been sold to people as sex positivity is just calibrating the settings so that they work for men.

And I've always thought Andrew Sullivan's point about when you look at gay male sex culture versus lesbian sex culture sometimes that you can see some sort of essential difference between men and women and men approach sex, straight men approach sex without, I think, an awareness of the implied violence, the threat that a lot of women will say yes to sex because they don't feel empowered to say no.

And that can result in a lot of women having sex that they didn't enjoy, that left them

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feeling terrible and the guy doesn't even realize, right, because he's so thoughtless about it, because he hasn't projected himself into the woman's experience.

As a gay man, as a man who has sex with men, I think I have some appreciation for what it's like to have sex with men and for what men are, a lot of men don't.

And I think that results in a lot of bad sex for a lot of women.

And like I said, I think we do need some sort of counter reformation that corrects for and raises some awareness of and sensitivities around the relative vulnerability that a woman experiences in a sexual encounter with a man relative to the man's experience or even perceptions of the power differential that exists.

You had an interesting point in there that I was reflecting on while you were talking about how most of these books have been written by women.

And I get the sense, this is an unproven hypothesis, I don't get the sense that young men are super happy out there.

And you mentioned, you see it in the data that young men are not having a lot of sex, they're also having a lot of mental problems.

There's been this huge rise, the incels and omission of Austin's book is written in direct response to or at least the title essay is in direct response to incel stuff.

And I sometimes think on both sides that it gets to this idea that one thing that we have told people is that sex can solve more problems than it actually can.

I always thought there's a weird thing that would happen repeatedly in conversations about incels where somebody would say and then get a ton of crap, I think correctly for saying, well, should we just give them sex workers?

Should there be some kind of right to a sex worker?

And even if you could do that, and even if that was not incredibly dehumanizing the sex workers, I think it's completely clear that what these people wanted was not actually intercourse, it was status, it was the sense of having a position in society where people wanted you and would desire you and would think you had worth enough worth that they would choose you freely.

And solving that need is way harder than answering the question of how can we possibly get you laid?

And similarly, I think what a lot of people are looking for in relationships that doesn't get well answered by hookups is these kind of secondary needs about what the gaze of another person means to me as a person.

And I don't know, reading some of these books, I've had this thought and I'm curious if it rings true to you that we just have had a lot more sexual revolution than relational revolution or relationship revolution.

I mean, we do talk about monogamy versus polyamory versus ethical monogamy, non-monogamy more.

But in terms of how we relate to each other, we just seem way behind the amount of freedom we have suddenly achieved.

I completely agree.

I am one of those people, though, who've suggested that I don't think it's a solution to incels to hand sex workers to them.

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I have a lot of friends, unlike a lot of people who write about these things, who are sex workers.

The last thing I want to do is lock one of my friends who's a sex worker in a room with a violent misogynist in cell.

That said, downstream in a culture where we de-stigmatized sex work and de-stigmatized paying for sex in that very clear way of handing over of money for sex, people who, in addition to feeling emotionally unfulfilled, emotionally unsatisfied, then also stew in sexual deprivation, it might be a balm.

I think all relationships, if you really peel the layers back far enough or at some point transactional, I pay for it with my husband.

I don't pay for it with cash money.

I pay for it with time, attention, affection, concern, making sure he goes to see the doctor when he needs to go see the doctor.

There's a reason married people live longer.

If I stopped paying in like that, if I stopped caring about him, if he stopped paying in like that, not paying me with those same ephemeral, intangible, but very important things, our relationship would collapse.

We see transactional relationships everywhere.

If you know people who are sex workers, a lot of what they're paid for is not sex.

It's time, it's attention, it's focus.

If we have a culture that tells people that if you ever had to pay for it with cash, you're a loser or a monster or both, it makes the one outlet that some people may have.

The one way that some people may pay for it that other people who are also paying for it might not pay for it, it closes that lane down.

It's not a solution for people who are right now on Reddit celebrating violence against women because they're so angry about being low status.

It's a solution that could roll out over a generation or four where we have less incels, less violence, less misogyny a hundred years from now than we do now.

If we could all just recognize, just like we should all recognize that being in love and in a committed, monogamous relationship doesn't mean your partner isn't interested in the waiter, if we could also recognize that all relationships, all sexual relationships, all emotional relationships are on some level transactional and therefore we shouldn't stigmatize the ones that are more evidently transactional.

I agree on the not stigmatizing, but I want to hold, I'm so interested in this word transactional and I'm trying to watch what's happening in my own head on it, which is just fancies where we all pay for it.

I know, but this is what has come to my mind on this.

I don't know if with more time to think about it, I would hold here, but I'm going to go with my instinct, which is I think this is a place where our market metaphors are so dominant that that feels right even as it feels to me wrong, which is I wonder why the word there isn't actually still relational, which is to say, I mean, on some level, everything has an exchange and everything has a dynamic and things you give and things you get. But one thing I have transactional, truly transaction relationships in my life and what

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makes them transactional is the ability to fairly cleanly walk away.

One of the weird things about being a parent and having childcare is you have people who are embedded in your life in this unbelievably important familial role.

And also you pay them and it creates this very intense and noticeable tension between the transactional level of the relationship and the fact that they love your child and you love your child and you love them for loving your child and like that.

And it's this whole thing.

And this is a little bit what I mean when I say sometimes I think that we have like over theorized and overworked on sex and under theorized and underworked on relationships because in some ways it seems cleaner to say the relationship is transactional.

But what's so frustrating and real about them to me is how often they're not.

But maybe one of the things you exchange in that transactional committed relationship is the difficulty of extracting yourself from it, of extricating yourself from it.

One of the things that Terry has given me is marriage and one of the things I've given him is marriage, which up the stakes and made walking away from this relationship created a degree of difficulty that has disincentivized walking away from this relationship and that is one of the things that we've exchanged.

And it's a beautiful thing really about marriage.

I had a friend who used to say that I heard him say and I've always felt it's true that before he and his partner got married you'd be arguing over the curtains in the house and it wasn't clear if you're arguing about the curtains or arguing about whether or not you should break up.

And after you get married you're until a certain really, really intense point.

You really are arguing about the curtains and there's both difficulty and beauty in that.

Yeah.

I'm not against love and I don't think love is...

I'm not putting you in it against love.

I'm just thinking aloud with you.

I'm not against love and I think there's some there, there, but it's so hard to pin down.

It's so subjective, it's so personal, it's so hard to describe.

You can only describe sort of the physical worlds and actual actions and deeds that are attendant to it, right?

But I know it's there and I know it's a thing itself too.

I also know that it's an idea, I also know it's a lie.

A love story is something that two people create together, it's a myth two people create together and then recommit to and are always sort of editing and reshaping and retelling.

And it has a power, stories have power.

Even that though, the telling and retelling of that story is something we give each other in a relationship and something that gives us a feeling of meaning and safety and contentment as individuals, but also then as that...

We are all individuals, a couple is an idea, a couple is something two individuals agreed to pretend to be together, right?

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I love that, I think that's so unbelievably true.

You think about so many of the problems of sex in a long-term relationship is trying to recapture the magic and intensity and passion of the beginning and so much of the sex advice industrial complex is about lying to people and telling them they can, right?

Or that they should and that it's possible.

And a long-term relationship by way of...

And we're not really even talking now about the rethinking sex, the right to sex, the problem of connection and how atomized people are these days and the difficulty, particularly younger people are having and finding each other and the paradox of choice.

There's too many different kinds of mustard in the mustard aisle, the groceries store, people walk down that aisle and don't get mustard, even if they was on their list because they can't choose and really the internet has created for many people that...

And so it's not all people who feel low status, who feel cheated, who feel unmarketable for some reason.

A lot of people who are in the mustard aisle of the dating apps and want to pick a jar of mustard and would like to have mustard at home whenever they want it, can't quite bring themselves to do it.

And I think all of these problems and how we figure out how to address them are better problems to have than what people pine for, which are when women didn't have options, when women weren't legal adults, when women couldn't have credit cards or bank accounts or sign leases, when women were property and a lot of men wound up in relationships with women who were there under duress and we called that marriage, right?

And that's not the case anymore.

And how do we control for that?

How do we control for high status men churning through as many women as they can get, just like high status gay men used to be able to churn through a lot of male partners?

And then how do we control for low status or low social skills?

When I talk to insults and I've talked to insults, I've gotten on the phone with some people privately, you think of that movie, I think The Sessions with Helen Hunt, it's about a sex worker going to see a profoundly physically disabled client.

And everyone's like, oh, that's wonderful.

That's complicated because we have weird screwed up feelings about sex work and whether it's legitimate, whether it's work or not, whether it should be legal or not, safe or not.

That's the argument when it comes to the legality of sex work is not whether it's going to exist or not, or it's going to be safe or riskier than all jobs are.

And we recognize that if somebody is profoundly physically disabled, that the attention and affection of a sex worker is a wonderful thing to be provided, sometimes even by family to that person.

Well, a lot of the insults that I've actually spoken to are profoundly socially disabled.

I think that disability, when somebody who has profound social disabilities sees a sex worker, we should be able to recognize that, that need for affection, that need for sex, this route to obtaining it and the improvement to the quality of life of that person, it's legitimate.

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It's legitimate.

And it is a net good.

And we should make that easier, not, you know, through federal subsidies, you know, the department

of sex work, we should make that easier by eliminating the stigma and giving people who do sex work or see sex workers the benefit of the doubt, and then also to recognize some people who see sex workers, to recognize ourselves, to recognize the ways in which even in our own committed relationships, there are still these transactional elements doesn't mean there's not affection.

Everyone I know who is a sex worker who has long term clients, those are relationships of real lasting affection, those are long term relationships.

And yet we want to knock those relationships down to purely transactional.

We want to call them crimes.

And then we refuse to recognize in our own relationships, the transactional elements that might help us empathize with people who have no other outlet except a sex worker.

There's so much richness in that answer, but I want to go back to something you said early in it that struck me as one of the truest sentences I've ever heard, which is every couple is an idea.

And in a way, all of us are ideas.

And another way of framing some things I've been saying here is that a big part of sex is how it changes or affirms or validates or undermines our idea of ourselves.

But you also see in relationships and in couples, this line, you know, that the people often have many marriages to the same person.

And I think that's true, but it's always been a very unclear line, what it means.

But I think what you're saying is a much clearer way of saying it that what will often happen in a marriage and it's happened in mine is that the first idea of the couple stops being true.

And that's a very, very, very difficult place when that idea stops being true, when the story you told is no longer the story that fits.

And couples that survive and thrive can find another idea of themselves.

Some other story that they now inhabit and they're proud of and they like, but it's also true for individuals.

You know, a lot of life is having a story that you believe of yourself and that other people believe enough about you that you can move through the world in a way that you recognize who you are and recognize how you're seen and you are okay with what you see in that recognition.

I'm curious though, because this seems like a skill and I want to actually speak about skills here, but that we don't really have, which is to know explicitly how to tell what stories we are telling and also know how to change them, know how to make them amenable to editing, to difference, to new chapters.

How do you think about that?

Well, the difficulty is you have to be telling the same story together that if your revision isn't also your wife's revision or the new way that you're telling the story, if you're

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imposing it on your partner, or it's just in conflict with the story that they're telling about the relationship, it's going to be a very dysfunctional relationship.

It's going to fall apart.

That's the hard part.

Like, you know, I've been with my husband for almost 30 years.

We've had very different stages and eras of our relationship.

It's more like layers of sediment.

It's more like, you know, digging up Troy than it is just like scrapping the story and telling a new one.

There's just this new city built on top of the old city, but the old city is still under there somewhere.

The hard part is, you know, when you're in conflict, and Terry and I have stared into the abyss.

We've gone into couples counseling, we've in bitter conflicts, screamed the word divorce in each other's spaces.

And then we came to a new understanding of who we were going to be to each other and how that was going to work.

And we began to inhabit that new story and tell that new story together.

And that only works if you can do it together.

Can I jump back for a second?

Please.

When you were asking that question about like, we see it's a cliché, you know, the powerful CEO who goes to see the dominatrix, right?

The right on feminist woman who wants during sex with a partner that she chose and she feels safe and comfortable with wants her hair pulled and wants to be called a slut.

The gay guy who's out and proud and is turned on during sex with someone he chose to have, you know, homophobic hate words hurled at him during sex.

These are all clichés.

These are all truisms about sex.

And the paradox is, this is not who I am.

Like I am not a dirty slut who should have her hair pulled.

This is not who I am.

By leaping into that in fantasy or role play or experience, it almost affirms and solidifies who you are the rest of the time, the 99.9999% of the time when that is not happening.

There's something about sex where we want to transgress against our ideas of self.

There's also something that's dangerously powerful about sex where we want to transgress against the story we're telling as a couple.

That there's something about being in a long-term committed relationship.

And there's something about sex where sometimes you want to be not you.

And that can then extend to sometimes you want to violate who you're perceived to be, the couple that you want to violate who your partner thinks you are, how do you put those things in harness to serve the relationship as opposed to tear the relationship apart.

Is a real varsity level, high degree of difficulty thing to do honestly, really, to incorporate

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honestly into the relationship.

Most people incorporate that stuff dishonestly into the relationship.

And I don't mean that most people cheat in a relationship, but that most people have that zone of erotic autonomy or those times when they tiptoe up to the edge and then they don't jump over when they see how they could transgress.

And that makes the adrenaline pump and that makes us feel like individuals again.

And I think that's so important, right?

And even just respecting your partner's privacy, I talked to so many people who have no respect to their partner's privacy as if their privacy is a violation of the idea of the couple, their partner having privacy.

And this road so many people are on, these expectations so many people have about what it is to be a part of a couple are cancers that grow on their relationships until they kill them.

I think there's something really interesting there in the way sex is a space where we'll do things or inhabit things we would not say.

And then I want to complicate the we here.

So I moved out to San Francisco four years ago and I was coming from DC where I'd lived for 14 years.

And that's a pretty head spinning difference in relational and sexual cultures and to say the least.

Well, one thing here that has been striking is my community here, it's much more queer than it was.

It's much less likely to be monogamous than it was.

I know people who are more in the King community, which is not something I knew much about before.

And for a bit I was like really struck by all the category changes and differences in definition and rules.

And then after some time of just knowing everybody, what I came to think was that the big difference

out here is communication styles, that the way people will talk about what they want and negotiate their relationship or negotiate something within King for themselves or it's like stuff that I wouldn't have even spoken about the thing, much less actually asked for the thing with a person whose opinion of me I was concerned about.

And I think there's so much tension, there's so much attention on what kind of sexed people should have and what kinds of relationships they should have and are they polyamorous or monogamous.

But actually this is more in a weird way important about how people communicate that that's so much the base layer of all the relationships.

And can you even know what story your partner is telling?

It's so different to listen to people who are actually negotiating everything out and are used to doing that.

That was by far the biggest revolution in what I realized was possible.

And I want to claim credit for that.

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Not me personally, not because of my column, gay people.

I think that's right though.

I've always said as a provocation myself.

Gay people have more sex, no more about sex and are better at sex than straight people are.

And then that makes straight people get defensive and recoil.

And then I tell them why that's true.

We have to communicate.

A man and a woman consent to sex and go to bed for the first time.

That's usually when the conversation about sex stops.

Because what's going to happen is a default setting and is assumed much to the detriment of both of their experiences often, those assumptions can result in people having the kind of bad sex that Christine Ember writes about a lot.

When two men go to bed together for the first time, they consent to sex.

It is the beginning of a conversation because there is no default setting.

What's going to happen?

Who's going to do what to whom?

My first sexual experiences with other men, and I lost my virginity with a woman.

So my first experiences weren't with men.

My first sexual experience with men, the guy looked at me and said, what are you into?

I call them the four magic words.

What are you into?

And at that moment, you can rule anything in, rule anything out.

You can ask for what you want.

You've been asked to ask for what you want because your partner can't assume, right?

I have had experiences where both people ask that question at the exact same time and then look at each other and say, jinx, right?

What are you into?

Haha, jinx.

And then you have that conversation.

Some straight people have that conversation.

Most don't because they can avoid it.

Gay people don't have that conversation because we're more highly evolved.

We don't have that conversation because we're better.

We have that conversation because we must.

And that's what you see in San Francisco.

You see a lot of people, straight people who have embraced what are you into as the start of a conversation about a relationship and about a sexual relationship, and it's made them better at sex.

It's made them better at relationships.

You know, I don't want to say gay people are necessarily better at relationships, but the Netherlands, other studies have shown that gay men are often slower to commit, but once they commit, less likely for the relationship to end.

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And I think it's because of those conversations and because of that question. But I think this is part of why there's so much unhappiness right now for a lot of people because, and I feel this even, so I met my wife, not then my wife, right before the rise of app dating.

So online dating is still a little bit weird, and it, within five years would be all anybody I knew did.

And so this crazy thing happened, which is that the fundamental scarcity of your love life, like how do you find a person to date?

You've met your friends, friends, you're not good at dating in people parties, like what are you going to do?

Like you meet people at work or you used to, right?

It upends.

And all of a sudden people have this insane amount of choice.

And I thought from the outside of this, I mean, this is going to be a wonderland.

Like how great.

And then, you know, nobody was happy.

And people get, get tired and they seem to be meeting, you know, a lot, a lot of pain, you know, attached there too.

It's not like there's been some great shift in our societal happiness or the quality of our relationships or anything.

And I do think this is a place where maybe the problem got mistaken, that there's so much more freedom and possibility and choice, and those things all seem really great. But you need a lot of skills and particularly communication skills to navigate that.

And we got all these new options and possibilities and no upgrade or change in skills.

And to some degree, no change in expectations.

And those things are in a level of conflict with each other that it seems to me to be making a lot of people miserable.

Well, the better people are communicating their desires, their wants, their boundaries, the less likely they are to wind up in a situation where they're having, you know, bad sex happens to everybody, but less likely to wind up in a situation where you're having sex or in a relationship that isn't making you happy, you know, the people out there who aren't having sex usually have a problem with communicating, with asking, with telling.

And one of the things I wanted to jump back to is that thing you said it can be difficult to share your actual wants and desires.

When the stakes are high, I can't remember exactly how you put it.

That's often a problem in relationships, you know, people put up their Potemkin Village version of themselves.

And then they get into a committed relationship and they haven't actually revealed who they are sexually and what they want sexually.

They didn't start with that.

And now if, you know, revealing those things about yourself is a threat to the relationship potentially you fear it might be, you don't, you kick that can further down the road.

It becomes harder and harder to reveal.

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But I'm not, I guess I'm not really answering your question.

Yeah.

Everyone's unhappy all the time.

Internet dating has been really interesting.

You know, Terry and I predate that Terry and I both have other partners that we did meet on the internet.

So we have some experience with what the internet is like.

And some people are paralyzed by the amount of choice that they have, you know, the mustard aisle problem.

I think that's preferable to the lack of choice that people used to endure before the sexual revolution, before the internet came along.

And we need, you know, we have new problems to address and we have new problems to correct for.

And some people are miserable because they haven't made a choice, right?

And they need to be encouraged to perhaps make a choice and sometimes having someone or something is better than having no one or nothing.

And there is no perfect partner.

There's no lid for every pot, you know, there's no the one, which is another thing I talk about in my column all the time.

There's a 0.73 that you round up to the one.

And that's about as the best you can do.

And some people find that dispiriting, I think that's kind of lovely because not only are you rounding that person up, but you know that they're rounding you up too.

And I think that's a gift and you should take it.

I'm Wesley Morris, a critic at the New York Times, and I work in the culture department.

And we make everything from diary of a song to that amazing 25 greatest actors of the 21st century list.

And it's easy to take that criticism and reporting for granted, but it takes a lot of people putting in a lot of time.

And the New York Times is one of the very few news organizations left putting in that work.

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I want to take a moment here on communication culture because as you were saying, that's something that was occurring to me is you think about this in terms of sex, but actually want to think about it in terms of relationships.

And I'll put it on myself that one of the hardest things for me has been getting to a point where I'm not offended by needing to ask for what I need, right?

Not getting over the fantasy that other people are going to know what it is I needed a moment or that it is not natural for them to provide it, that is some kind of problem with them.

And this is a place I think where where expectations are very destructive, but getting to a point as a person where you frankly know what you need, that you are willing to ask for it enough times that other people can understand it or be reminded of it, and that you're not so worried about everybody else's reactions to that, that you're not paralyzed when making

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the when making the ask because other people's discomfort is more unbearable than your own or than your own possible, you know, feeling of humiliation or what happens if you ask and it can't be offered.

And it got me thinking about, I watched as part of preparing for this a conversation you did with Esther Perrell on YouTube, it's on YouTube and people should check it out, it's fantastic.

The two of you have a long thing about what sex ed could and should be like in your perfect world.

And it left me thinking a lot about how there's no relationship ed and nobody even really talks about one to say nothing of just how we talk to each other.

Which is what sex ed should be.

Which is probably what sex ed should be, but just it's not even just sex, it's friendships and work, it's our whole democracy.

Just being good at communication is so bedrock and we just kind of turn people out in the world like hope for the best, like good luck to you.

Yeah.

I don't know what I have to say there except that I completely agree.

I would add to the ability to ask for what you need is also the ability to see what you're capable of giving, to know what you're capable of giving, and sometimes the ability to be patient because you may ask for something and not get a yes right away or get it right away or be told you need to wait or be patient, you'll get it soon or eventually this weekend or I'm moving toward that or not yet.

Which is often something people hear when they ask to open a relationship is maybe and that's a conversation we need to keep having.

So yeah, ask for what you need, know what you can give, and know that the answer isn't always going to be yes.

There's a thing I talk about in my column on my podcast all the time called the price of admission, which is there's a price of admission you pay to be in any relationship.

And if there's something that's a price of admission you're unwilling to pay, you shouldn't be in that relationship.

But if there's no price you're willing to pay to be in a relationship, you're not going to ever be in a relationship.

In addition to being a myth, a story relationship is a never ending compromise.

I think of this as the deepest level of your work, which is this constant pressure you're putting on people's expectations and constant light you're trying to shine on it.

To have realistic expectations.

Yes.

People have unrealistic expectations, then they're constantly disappointed.

And this can get very like metaphysical people's expectations.

I do not expect when I go home to find a clean kitchen, because the people I live with are not going to do dishes.

So I am never crushed when I get home, and the first thing I have to do is dishes.

It's like price of admission that I pay to be in these relationships, and that's fine.

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And the trick to a price of, paying the price of admission is you don't bitch about it.

You pay the price, you ride the ride.

You don't want to pay the price, don't get on the roller coaster, but don't buy a ticket to that roller coaster, and then complain the whole time you're on the ride about how much it cost.

At a certain point, you just get off or don't get on that ride.

And in addition to encouraging people to have realistic expectations, people have to take responsibility for the choices that they've made, for the tickets they purchased, and be with the people that they're actually with.

And if they don't want to be with that person or people, they shouldn't be.

I do want to jump back to what sex ed should be, because I think this isn't so important.

And maybe people listen to your show who have some control of this, oh my God, in the seizing of school boards across the country and the current sex panic about groomers, any information being provided to kids about sex, sexuality, identity, reproductive biology you can cover in a half an hour.

It's simple.

What people get hurt having sex is communication, is negotiation, is talking somebody into having sex with you, is making sure that you have their consent, is making sure that you've clearly communicated whether they have yours, and feeling empowered to have those kinds of negotiations and conversations.

That is where people get hurt.

That is where sex goes wrong.

How to put a condom on a banana?

You can do that.

You can actually transmit infections, you can cover the ones people need to worry about in 10 extra minutes.

Everything else is difficult and hard, because feelings come into play, insecurities come into play, expectations, realistic and unrealistic come into play, and that's where people get in trouble.

And the people we often have the hardest time talking about with sex are our sex partners.

How did we construct that, and how do we deconstruct that?

That corner we've painted ourselves into, that the person we feel most least free being ourselves with and opening up with about who we are sexually and what we want is somebody that we are about to have sex with for the first time, or somebody we've been having sex with for 20 years.

How do you get better at communication?

Even as you're saying that, it occurred to me, if I want to get stronger, I know who I can go pay.

If I want to eat better, I know who I can go pay.

If I want somebody who can teach me how to rock climb, I know who I can go pay.

I know where to look.

I was going to say the yellow pages, but that's only because I'm 1,000 years old now, but in Google.

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And I got the reference, so I'm much older than you, as it were.

But communication, it's everything, I mean, on some level, and completely fuzzy out there.

If you're somebody who wants to be a better communicator, where do you start?

People know how to ask for what they want from a waiter.

People know how to ask often for what they want from a sex worker.

One of the things when it comes out, as it has, people call me to write me, their partner was seeing a sex worker and was doing with the sex worker something they never asked the partner to do with them, and it was because they weren't afraid that the sex worker would leave them.

And usually when people have a hard time communicating about sex, desire, intimacy, relationships, there's this fear of rejection, fear of being judged, fear of being left.

Early in a relationship, you should embrace rejection, and you should run at that fear.

You have to be willing to risk it.

That's how you become a better communicator.

You can't ask for what you want if you're not willing to risk losing what you have.

And what you might risk losing is this person that you just met on an app that you're getting along with, and you'd like to see naked, and you risk communicating, not in a, like, if you come home with me, we're going to do four things from column A, four things from column B, and one thing from column C. But just like being actually who you are, in some ways, you have to straddle this creation of the Potemkin self, you know, your best self, and your real self.

You have to do both at the same time, and that can be difficult.

And I'm not trying to dodge your question here.

It's just about disinhibiting around the fear of rejection, that if this person isn't right for you, give them a chance, allow them to give you a chance.

There may be things that you don't agree on, you know, everything won't be on the menu, but so much is, and so much does work that, you know, you're willing to let go of some things and, you know, round them up, they're going to round you up, you're willing to pay certain prices of admission, but you have to be willing to risk rejection.

And that's why people have a hard time communicating.

So if you're going to open the yellow pages in 1972 and try to find, you know, where to go to get strong, you look for the gym, you just have to, there's no willing to risk rejection coach in the yellow pages, but that's what you have to be willing to do.

And that's inside you.

And that's really about prioritizing your needs, your comfort, what you want.

And, you know, finding somebody who wants enough of what you want and enough of what you are, and vice versa, that it would work out long term, which is not to say that one of the things I like to talk about is that we over-emphasize the importance or the privacy of long-term relationships.

We have many more short-term relationships, and we should want those to be successes too.

I don't think a relationship has to end with somebody in a box at a funeral home for it to have been a success, but death is our only standard of success.

You know, a relationship is the only thing that we regard as a failure if everyone involved

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gets out alive, imagine if we applied that standard to restaurants or flights, right? If it's a high conflict relationship and a, you know, terrible divorce and nobody can stand each other, speak to each other again, if there was abuse, emotional, physical, yeah, that relationship needed to end and was probably experienced as a failure, particularly by the person who was abused.

If two people get out of a relationship and there's affection and respect, even a friendship, even if it ended, it was a success.

And if we just looked at all of our relationships, we have so many short-term relationships, and we work so hard at making the LTRs a success that we neglect making the STRs a success, and all an LTR is is an STR that worked out.

It's easy, I think, when we talk about communication to talk about us talking, right?

When I say how do I communicate, I think what people hear is how do I talk better?

But the flip of that is how do I listen better?

How do I actually hear what you're saying when you're talking to me?

I have met people, some people poisoned by the, maybe the discourse around sex, who are all about what they want and asking for what they want, demanding what they want, expecting what they want, and not about hearing what their partner wants and not regarding their partner's wants, needs, and securities as legitimate as their own.

It's like that definition of pornography, you know, when you see it, you know when you're talking with somebody who's asking for what they want, you know when that person is also interested in what you want and finding that the center of that venn diagram where you can establish all the compatibilities, sexual compatibility, emotional compatibility, long-term prospect what you want out of life compatibilities, and you want to be that person and to be that person who can ask for what you want, but also give and listen, you have to be self-critical, you have to check in with friends, you have to listen to your exes, you have to identify patterns, you know, if you've had a long string of terrible relationships, at some point you have to look at that and go, well, I'm the common denominator.

What am I doing wrong?

And people have a hard time with that kind of communication, the internal communication, self-criticism, and you have to ask yourself what you want and how you're getting in the way of it.

I want to ask you about something we touched on at the beginning, which is first a bridge that you've been a big part of from the LGBTQ community to the straight community, but also now the way that's changing and just the underlying structure that is changing.

So I think the polling on this is really, really interesting.

So Gallup says 2.6% of baby boomers identify some sort of LGBTQ, 10.5% of millennials do and 20% of Gen Z does and that 20% is doubled in a fairly short period of time.

What do you think accounts for those radically higher rates?

These are things that will get me in trouble for saying that out loud.

There's been this explosion in sort of more finely sized sexual orientations, identities, how many pride flags are there now, I have lost count, and younger people may be more comfortable identifying as not straight, identifying as queer in ways that as a result of relationship styles or interests that when you or I or people who remember what the yellow pages

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are or were, hear the word queer, we think same sex relationships for the most part and a lot of people who identify as queer in that 20% of Gen Z aren't necessarily in or interested in or ever going to be in same sex relationships.

Themisexual is someone who can't experience sexual attraction in the absence of some sort of emotional connection, which describes a lot of people, right, who aren't gay or lesbian or bi or trans necessarily, it also describes a lot of people who are gay, lesbian, bi and or trans, and asexuality is a real thing, really a hardwired sexual orientation for about 1% of the population.

Can you say what asexual is for people who don't know?

Someone who doesn't experience sexual desire, and you know, it is a spectrum, everything's a spectrum, right?

So there are some people who are asexual who experience minimal sexual desire, there are some people asexual who have sexual relationships because sex meets a need that's not about sex.

It's incredibly complicated.

That said, most people who are asexual, who are in relationships or would like to be in relationships are still interested in heteroromantic relationships, even if they're not sexual relationships.

So there's a lot of people being shipped under the queer label now that yellow pages, types like you and me, can't easily identify, can't see under that umbrella, right?

But they are.

And that's great.

Welcome.

Welcome.

All four are the most expansive definition of queer as possible.

And anybody who wants to identify as whatever they want to identify as, can't identify as that.

I see people on the right freaking out about, you know, at this rate, everybody's going to be queer in 100 years.

And then we're going to go extinct as a species because we're going to forget which whole babies comes out of, I guess.

A lot of these people who identify as queer and may be legitimately so, when it comes down to sex and relationships are going to end up in having sex that social conservatives would be comfortable with and having relationships that most social conservatives would be comfortable

with.

And most social conservatives would assume they're not having if they're queer identified when they actually are.

You're in San Francisco.

How many people do you know who identify as queer are opposite sex and married?

However they identify in other ways are technically opposite sex and in marriages that may or may not be monogamous.

It's really high.

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And that's wonderful, I guess.

This is sort of the motivation for the question in a way, which is that, and I feel again, like I'm 2,000 years old when I start asking questions motivated by, I was talking to some teens, but at least among people I've met out here, straight is not an aspirational identity.

Like it's sort of something you're like, yeah, sorry, you know, and that there, it's a really interesting, that's why I'm kind of asking your thoughts, and it's a really interesting change to me that has happened in my lifetime and seems to be growing where well, it's just like Christian.

Like so many people, you know, nuns are the fastest growing category of believers, people who don't believe in anything.

Oh, not Christian nuns, but N-O-N-E-S.

N-O-N-E-S.

Yes.

People who don't have a, yeah.

I remember Christian nuns.

I was taught by them, and a lot of these people are still sort of nominally Christian, they just don't want to publicly associate with what Christianity, politicized Christianity has come to mean in our culture, thanks to odious people like Jerry Falwell Jr. and Tony Perkins and Family Research Council, they don't want to be affiliated with that.

And I think the same process has sort of played out with straight.

Because a lot of people who feel like straight's brand is toxic, there used to be a greater stigma attached to being perceived as not straight.

And in certain subcultures, certain milieus, that polarity has flipped.

This gets to something that I sometimes hear from my queer friends and particularly my more politically radical queer friends, which is that we were talking earlier about the ways in which a lot of gay culture has migrated to straight culture.

But there's a feeling that's gone the other way too, that there was a more radical set of family formations of kinship, not just non-monogamy, but ideas about how you would structure families of choice and how you would structure social networks and what it would mean to be in a relationship.

And that in the fight for gay marriage, there was a lot of what gets called assimilation.

But that a lot of that got pushed to the margins and a lot of that experimentation stopped happening.

I sometimes get asked how having children changed my politics, which I have all kinds of answers for.

But the main thing it's done more recently is really persuade me that something is completely wrong and how we do family.

That it's a pretty new experience for so many people to live so far from the rest of their family.

A four-year-old and a one-year-old and at this moment, we don't live near any family.

That's really hard.

And it's completely insane.

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And my colleague, David Brooks, has written a great piece in the Atlantic a couple years back on this.

The nuclear family, this kind of golden age and nuclear family, was a couple decade long aberration.

Before that, you had big extended families that lived together.

And then after that, what you have is richer people buying extended families through purchasing a lot of household help and childcare and so on.

And poor people really struggling.

And we do, I think, have a constant ferment around questions of, you know, sexual revolution and we've been talking about relational revolution.

But it just seems to me that two people is too few to raise a family.

Now, maybe one answer is you live near your family if you can.

And if that works for your job and if your family, you know, your parents are healthy and able to help.

And I mean, there are all kinds of qualifications there.

But in many ways, I keep waiting for this thing people, social conservatives keep warning me is coming, which is more experimentation in how we do family, more experimentation in how we do child raising.

I mean, I do know people out here who they live in poly households and six people raised, you know, two kids, and it's not so much about who's sleeping with whom.

It's really about the parenting.

And just something just has seemed off to me as a parent for some time.

It just, we have so little community and we seem trapped in this view that this kind of atomization is okay, or we paper over it with money.

And I don't know, I don't feel like in a hundred years we're going to be doing it this way.

I don't know how we're going to be doing it, but this seems crazy.

We weren't doing it this way a hundred years ago.

I grew up in a multi-generational household, grew up in a two-flat apartment building, which is an apartment building that only has two apartments in it on the north side of Chicago. And my grandparents and aunts and uncles lived downstairs and my mom and dad and my three siblings lived upstairs.

There are a lot of people around and everybody helped raise the kids and some of my aunts and uncles were still kids themselves when we were very little children.

That worked.

There were downsides.

You know, you were always who you were as a child.

You were always under the gaze of, you know, your parents, your grandparents.

We overcorrected when we atomized and the pressure it puts on two people alone, just a couple, to raise kids like Hillary Clinton was right.

It really does take a village and we have to ask ourselves, what are the motives of the people out there trying to convince everyone that it should just be two people living in a suburban home in the suburbs?

I blame the automobile.

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I bring the expressway for, you know, contributing to the atomization of the family. But yeah, having family close by or having people in your life that are family, the family you've created, you know, biological can extended family, but, you know, the family of choice that people talk about in places like San Francisco and Seattle, that makes parenting easier and more possible and resetting those cultural norms around extended families and around not expecting that a couple can or should do everything.

You know, one of the things my mom did when Terry and I first became parents and she came to visit was take our infant from us and push us out the front door and told us to take advantage.

Right?

You know, one of the things my mother told me when I became a parent was the only time you remember why you liked your partner enough to want to have children with them in the first place was when you were alone with your partner away from your children.

And that was possible for my parents when we were little kids because of my grandparents and aunts and uncles.

And it was harder for us because our family wasn't in Seattle with us.

I completely agree with you and not just in this way, but in so many ways, set up a system that makes parenting as miserable, isolating, and punishing as possible.

And then social conservatives sit around with their thumbs and their butts wondering why so few people want to do this anymore.

And it's not just about childcare.

It's not just about professional childcare, it's about, you know, preschool or daycare.

It's also about, you know, mother-in-law apartments.

It's about people living, you know, in denser places.

The neighborhood I grew up in Chicago was very dense.

It was one of the reasons why, you know, when an aunt or an uncle moved out of my grandparents' house, they moved down the block.

And it was possible for them to move down the block and to stay in their lives and to be a relief for my parents who had four kids.

And this is a place that goes back to your focus sometimes on expectations where I have every supply of a flexible job, I make good money, my partner and I like have a good relationship, we split the parenting.

The expectations you're given on this are completely insane.

And basically every parent I know, you end up talking for two minutes.

I mean, Jessica Gros just wrote a book about this.

You end up talking for two minutes and people are just climbing up the walls.

And the part of the difficulty of it is this belief in the back of your head that somewhere somebody is doing this perfectly, right?

Somewhere it isn't feeling like this for them.

And it isn't.

But it's just a place where there's been so little experimentation.

I mean, you were just mentioning density and housing.

I think a big problem for liberals here is that, look, we can and should have universal

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pre-K and childcare and every part of the social state that can help people parent that is possible and that we see in dozens and dozens of other countries.

But it isn't going to solve all of this.

Like at some point, there is this question of just the community around the parent.

I mean, Clinton's book in this way is really prophetic.

I should go back and read it again because we've just completely lost it.

And I did this conversation with Patrick Deneen some number of months ago, and he's a kind of hardcore, post-liberal, conservative, very intense ideology happening over there.

Terrifying.

But I was thinking after our conversation about the way in which something that he understood correctly was that liberals had stopped having anything really to say about the family beyond social sports.

And as such, they weren't talking to people in a language they could hear.

And I don't think where Deneen is going with this is going to talk to them in a language that makes sense either.

I do think we got to a point where after how much discrimination and how many wars for equality there were, a lot of folks got into a space of just wanting to show that they were accepting and also they weren't trying to change too much simultaneously, as opposed to saying something has really gone wrong here and we should be in a space of experimentation to try to create models where parenting is not something you inflict upon yourself, but something that works within the society that we have built.

Yeah.

I have strong views about this.

But I do too.

And I listen to that conversation and whenever you interview one of those people on the, I don't know what to call them, the far bizarro right, it's a torment to me because there are times when I'm nodding along, like we need more family support.

We need more working, you know, bring back jobs and make it possible for a family to function if it can on one income.

But we also need universal pre-K and daycare, but it can't be 30 miles away or 10 miles away.

It can't be on the block and one of the things you've been hammering away at is why liberals can't seem to run the cities that they're in charge of anymore.

And this block on constructing housing and denser neighborhoods where places where people want to live and where the jobs are.

And yet, you know, people who bought houses there 30 years ago are preventing the city where they live from continuing to be a city that functions and grows and where it's possible for families to thrive and, you know, multiple generations of a single family to live in close proximity to one another.

And it's a problem.

It reminds me of something that came up at the beginning of that conversation and people should go, sorry if you didn't listen to it.

It's a conversation between me and Patrick Diney and you can search it.

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But something he says at the beginning when I was asking him, who are you talking to? Who is your enemy here?

Because I'm pretty sure it's actually me was what I was trying to get at.

But nevertheless, he's like, well, there are these people, these liberals in the legal academy that want to do away with the family.

And maybe there are.

But the thing that's interesting to me is that the thing that I see on the edge and is a reason I brought this topic up in the context of the question of was something lost in the experimentations of the queer community around marriage is that the people I know who have expanded family quite a bit are in more marginal communities more often.

I mean, I don't know many polyamorous households, but I know a couple that raised children and it seems to work for them.

I do know, I do have queer friends who tend to have much more kind of serious aloe parenting among their communities because there's just more people who are bought into that family's success and they've built more of a chosen, the approach to the friendship is more like a family than it is among many straight folks or straight couples.

And I keep wondering if that kind of thing is going to expand because we're not going to abolish a family.

I find that to be a completely function of ridiculous concern, but we do somehow need to expand it.

And that's what we have not figured out.

Or have we?

Are the poly families or people engaged in aloe parenting that you're seeing in the process of figuring it out?

Have they figured it out?

I think they have.

You know, one of the things whenever I listen to a conversation of yours with someone like that dude, I always wish you'd ask them, and what are we going to do about the gay people who are already out and the queer families that are already formed?

Because they seem to regard us as the enemy of family.

As opposed, you know, we don't jump out of cabbage patches and we don't emerge fully formed from the back rooms of gay bars at 18.

We're part of these families that he pines for and the kind of family structure that he pines for.

And once we were free to start creating our own, we did.

We want to be a part of, you know, queer people of this familial project.

And yet we're regarded by the people arguing that liberals are the enemies of the family.

Our presence is somehow a threat to the family or antithetical to the idea of family.

And I would like to know what their fix is, what they're going to do about us.

And they never answer that question.

I don't think they have an answer, but I will ask you what your answer on the opposite is.

What are the principles of family, the ideas of family that you have seen in your community

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that, you know, if you were a parenting columnist and not a sex and relationships columnist, you'd be trying to push across the bridge.

Parenting comes up a lot.

Well, in a way, you know, I think it takes more than two people and sometimes a lot more than two people.

And that's often my advice to people about their sex lives.

That's also would be my advice to two people in a sexually exclusive relationship we're attempting to parent.

It can't just be the two of you.

You have to bring other people in, other, you know, family members if they're nearby.

And if you're going to have kids and start a family of your own, you need a network of chosen family to help you do this because it's so, so hard.

I think that's a good place to end.

Always our final question.

What are three books you'd recommend to the audience?

I gave this so much thought.

The Ethical Slut by Dosty Easton and Janet Hardy, I'm sure since moving to San Francisco, you probably heard this book mentioned or seen it on a shelf somewhere.

It was published 25 years ago and it's sort of the code of Hammurabi, where ethical nomenclography is concerned.

They should make that the blurb.

I read The Rise and Fall and the Third Reich when I was a kid and I've re-read it a couple of times, but William Shire, who wrote Rise and Fall and the Third Reich, he was a foreign correspondent in Berlin in the 30s.

He was worked with Edward Armuro and after the collapse of the Nazi regime, he wrote Rise and Fall and the Third Reich with access to the Nazi archives.

It's a fascinating book, but he also wrote something called Berlin Diary, which was published in 1941 without the benefit of hindsight, which is diary entries as he's witnessing the rise of fascism and totalitarianism in Germany.

I don't think I need to tell your audience why I think that book is so relevant to this moment.

I recently re-read it and it's chilling.

One that I don't think people will expect from me is The Royal Affair, George III and his scandalous siblings by Stella Tillard, George III, of course, at the King of England during the American Revolution.

I love royal histories, royal biographies.

I'm sort of a closet monarchist, except I'm always saying in the microphones I'm a closet monarchist, which I guess means I'm not a closet monarchist, but everyone's always trying to make in popular media and films and television a kind of proto-feminist hero of Marie Antoinette, which she just does not.

George III's youngest sister, Caroline Matilda, is that proto-feminist hero and Stella Tillard wrote a group biography about all of George III's siblings, but the focus is Caroline Matilda, and she lived openly in a polyamorous triad.

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She had a child by her husband, the King of Denmark, she was the Queen of Denmark, and a child by her lover, wore men's clothing, went out riding, and everything the American founding fathers did, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, banning cruel and unusual punishment, Caroline Matilda did first as a teenage girl in Denmark and Queen of Denmark in the 1760s.

That Americans don't know, I've been trying for a decade to make a TV show about Caroline Matilda happen without much success, but Stella Tillard's book is amazing, and if you like royal biographies, even if you don't, it's such a tremendous read.

In some ways, the title is a little salacious for the kind of original source history that Stella Tillard wrote about Caroline Matilda and her siblings.

If you're embarrassed by the title, just take the cover off the book, but read the book.

I would definitely watch it.

So prestige, drama producers who are listening and programmers, you know where to go, go to Dan Savage.

Dan, this has been such a pleasure.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

It was a real honor.

The Ezra Klein Show is produced by MfaGabu, Annie Galvin, Jeff Gelb, Berger Karma, and Kristen Lin.

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