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Just Thinking, 01/20/03:

Sex and the Whoa Moment

by Justin Katz

It probably wouldn't be controversial for me to suggest that an assertion deserves more credence when made by somebody from whom it is unexpected. A person who contradicts received knowledge within his social or ideological group is likely to have reasons for doing so, often drawn from experience with a behavior's outcome.

With the recent spurt of sexual discussion among people and periodicals generally devoted to cultural and political commentary, one such "whoa moment" came to mind. The professor who most truly represented the hippie ethos, in my collegiate experience, taught sociology. Although I didn't find it difficult to maintain my attention in his class, one statement that dispelled any meandering thoughts in my mind was, "Open marriages do not work." The professor had known several people who'd attempted as many variations, and they all failed.

Rod Dreher recently wrote a column for the *National Review Online* disclosing that, even in his rural Southern hometown, Tupperware parties were giving way to sex-toy parties. In response, a "swinger" from Manhattan emailed Mr. Dreher, declaring, "Gee whiz man, I mean, can't the ladies indulge their sexual curiosities and have some fun without it meaning society is unravelling [sic] and the family unit is through?"

Variations of this rhetorical question are generally among the first points raised in support of anything sexual, from masturbation to sex toys to “swapping.” Yet, they all ignore a simple fact of human nature: we are not *only* physical and intellectual; we are also emotional. Sex falls right on the line between our emotional needs and our physical desires. For this reason, it isn’t surprising that it is an area in which we are prone to intellectual confusion.

Most people will agree that sex is better when meaningful. In fact, the *National Health and Social Life Survey*, from 1992 (which is, admittedly, outdated), found more sexual frequency and satisfaction – almost entirely monogamous – among married couples. Libertines will often accept the real power of love and meaning but seek to excuse deviant sexual behavior as mere carnal pleasure. Such people would probably offer a curt “so what” to the suggestion that seeing sexual partners in this capacity treats them merely as things to be used for gratification. After all, everybody involved has consented and, presumably, the usage is reciprocal.

If sex is only a “fun” pastime, then it oughtn’t be any more objectionable than a massage. Certainly, to retreat from this extreme a bit, it would be acceptable to gratify one’s self, taking advantage of images or fantasies of characters outside of a marriage or other meaningful relationship. A correspondent recently put it thus, “Such fantasies also don’t hurt me or my wife – when I make love to her, I am focused completely on her, not imagining she’s some French lingerie model.”

However, if the key to the best of sex and the best of marriage is the emotional connection with and intellectual consideration of the spouse, then I’d suggest that fantasizing about another has implications for that emotional bond that are not wholly innocent. Why else the emphasis on not fantasizing under the marital covers? If a spouse is sufficiently arousing in bed, why isn’t she so in fantasy?

People who find nothing wrong with loose sexual behavior can claim consistent philosophies on the level of the individual. The majority of even promiscuous people, however, seem desirous to walk a fragile line between sex and love as well as individual liberty and social cohesion. Mr. Dreher's emailer cited Americans' "innocent idealism" as "something that makes us special and keeps us free from the blasé, relativistic and ultimately corrupting temptations that are the ills of cultures more at ease with pleasures of the flesh."

Conspicuously, the Manhattanite never addresses how his own responsibility intersects with maintaining this dynamic within our culture. My own position is that it's none of my business what people do in private and of their own accord. My "business" — my objection — comes in where such people attempt to promote their ideas. It is a private matter, not to be brought into the open.

Such counsel is anathema to modern sensibilities, which twinge at any suggestion of stigma. "And so we talk endlessly about sex, assured by the experts on TV and at *Cosmo* that we'll finally reach the New Jerusalem if only we could overcome our Repression," writes Dreher. The relativism is inherent in the mindset from the beginning. Taking as a premise that only perception — hang-ups — within society makes any particular behavior more or less objectionable than any other, the facile conclusion is that sexual liberation will only be shy of utopian to the extent to which we are unable to eradicate oppressively conflicting feelings. But emotions will always exist, dooming the project to failure, and pushing forward amounts to gambling society on the hopes that human nature can change at a radical pace.

I'd suggest that time is short for this experiment; children are catching on and, as they are wont to do, are following the logical progression of corrupting ideals. Many of them have decided that oral sex is not sex after all and may be done with as many people as accessible, with as little commitment and caution. Condoms "would be considered absurd." Teenagers are not as artful in their self-deception, so alcohol is often a requisite enabler. A "sizable number aren't aware

that disease can be transmitted by mouth”; a larger percentage, I’d wager, have next to no concept of how their behavior will weigh on them throughout their lives. In short, the kids are playing with aspects of life that are much beyond their maturity to handle.

The truth is that many adults are little more than children in this respect, and adults are much more dangerous. Not surprisingly, many of the actual teens look to television and movies for their inspiration, and adults produce what they see there and, worse, condone it. Many in my generation have recoiled from the disease and divorce and general cultural neuroses to emerge from the “sexual revolution.” With the arrival of AIDS into our childhood consciousness, we learned what modern teens do not know and their parents have apparently forgotten: the effects are delayed when gratification is not.

It could be that we ain’t seen nothin’, yet. I suspect that even my hippie sociology professor would agree.