

An Analysis Of “A Bouquet Of Lovers”

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Summary: The document, “A Bouquet of Lovers,” by Morning Glory Zell, defines and describes the structure of many polyamorous relationships today. *Bouquet* is, in some circles, the de facto standard structure for people who are first venturing into polyamory. It is so pervasive that, in other circles, although the document itself may be unknown, the structures of polyamorous relationships nevertheless follow its guidelines. Given its widespread influence, it behooves us to carefully analyze the concepts put forth by *Bouquet*.

Bouquet states that, “The goal of a responsible Open Relationship is to cultivate ongoing, long-term, complex relationships which are rooted in deep mutual friendships.” By using the terms, “ongoing,” “long-term,” and “complex,” *Bouquet* captures the ideal of polyamory: that we can have simultaneous, nontrivial relationships, with or among multiple partners. But the primary/secondary structure described by *Bouquet* can be interpreted in ways that actively prevent the realization of that ideal. Even normally reasonable and compassionate polyamorists might take a harmful and extreme interpretation of *Bouquet* if they feel that their relationship is threatened. It is important to be aware of the possibility for that interpretation, so as to avoid it.

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I encourage you to distribute this document as widely as you can, whether electronically, in hard copy, or otherwise. I feel that these ideas are extremely important to the health and success of polyamorous relationships, and my goal is to share them with as many people as possible. In addition to supporting those who may agree with these ideas, I look forward to debating those who disagree or who hold other ideas.

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Joshua Bardwell

Dedication

This document is dedicated to those pioneers, known and unknown, who ventured from the safe, open shores of monogamy into the unknown inland of polyamory. Truly, you blazed the trails that we walk today. Where there was no structure, you built houses. Where there were few precedents, you made traditions, simply by living according to what you believed worked best. For these things, we who follow are indebted to you.

I honor you, our ancestors in polyamory.

Introduction

The document, “A Bouquet of Lovers,” by Morning Glory Zell, defines and describes the structure of many polyamorous relationships today. *Bouquet* is, in some circles, the de facto standard structure for people who are first venturing into polyamory. It is so pervasive that, in other circles, although the document itself may be unknown, the structures of polyamorous relationships nevertheless follow its guidelines.

Why Analyze “Bouquet?”

Given its widespread influence, it behooves us to carefully analyze the concepts put forth by *Bouquet*. At the time of its creation, *Bouquet* filled a need for structure in polyamorous relationships, but like many religious documents, it has outlived the context in which it was created. Although *Bouquet* may not have been intended to be a religious document, in my experience, it is sometimes treated as such today. Specifically, its ideas are sometimes assumed to be correct and are defended dogmatically.¹

In the context of polyamory today, *Bouquet* may be relevant in different ways than it was originally. It may have been written to address a specific situation, but may require revision or clarification if it is to be applied more generally. Like every religious document, *Bouquet* should be carefully studied and individually interpreted, not followed blindly. This is especially true in the context of polyamory, where established formulae for success are scarce.

Is This Analysis Justified?

One might argue that it is unfair of me to expect what was originally a short magazine article to stand up to the level of scrutiny that I intend to apply. Most likely, *Bouquet* was intended as a helpful guide, not polyamory canon. But *Bouquet* has grown beyond its humble origins. It is commonly presented as, “the way polyamory is done,” not, “a way polyamory is done.” Its concepts, if not the document itself, are presented as a formula for success to people who are just beginning to explore polyamory—those who are most in need of correct guidance and support. *Bouquet*’s increased importance justifies the level of scrutiny that I will apply to it.

¹ Anyone else who feels that they have thoroughly analyzed *Bouquet* should please note the “sometimes” in this sentence before taking offense.

I am aware that Morning Glory and Oberon have published documents since *Bouquet* that attempt to expand upon the original document's ideas and to address some of the issues that I discuss in this paper, but those documents are nowhere near as widespread as *Bouquet* itself. For example, at the time of this writing, the Church of All World's own web site includes *Bouquet*, but none of the "subsequent" documents that expand upon its ideas. In my preparatory research for this paper, I was unable to find such documents in a web search (although *Bouquet* turned up prominently). I only learned of the "subsequent" documents after forwarding a copy of this paper to Oberon (whereupon he was happy to forward them to me). I choose to examine *Bouquet* without the benefit of the "subsequent" documents because, in my experience, that is how it is always presented.

My analysis of *Bouquet* should not in any way be taken as a commentary on the way in which Morning Glory Zell (the author of *Bouquet*) practices polyamory. I know essentially nothing about how she treats her relationship-partners. Like the many polyamorists who look to *Bouquet* for guidance, all I have to go on is her words in that document. One might argue that my interpretation of *Bouquet* is, at times, harsh or extreme. This interpretation is not meant to reflect Morning Glory's actual intent or practices.

Although my interpretation of *Bouquet* in this paper may be considered, at times, to be harsh or extreme, all of these observations are based on my six years experience practicing polyamory. That I have carried on a polyamorous relationship for six years is a testament to the skill and dedication of my partners and myself. Nevertheless, the arguments in this paper are far from theoretical.

I expect that *Bouquet* will be familiar to many readers. For reference and comparison, it can be found at: <http://www.caw.org/articles/bouquet.html> or in the appendix at the end of this document. If you have not read *Bouquet* recently or at all, I recommend that you do so before going any further.

The Ideal Of Polyamory

Bouquet states that, "The goal of a responsible Open Relationship is to cultivate ongoing, long-term, complex relationships which are rooted in deep mutual friendships." By using the terms, "ongoing," "long-term," and "complex," *Bouquet* captures the ideal of polyamory: that we can have simultaneous,

nontrivial relationships, with or among multiple partners.² Put another way, polyamory allows us to create relationships of any desired intimacy level without artificial restrictions that are based solely on the presence of pre-existing relationships. In polyamory, we are free to create loving relationships of whatever level of intimacy, and of whatever structure the participants desire, are able to negotiate, and are capable of sustaining.

Bouquet generally provides good advice for achieving the ideal of polyamory, especially its admonition about honesty and openness and its requirement that all partners fully and willingly embrace the polyamorous lifestyle. At the same time, it defines a structure that, under an extreme interpretation, precludes the safety and incentives that are required to create deep, complex, loving, non-monogamous relationships. The very people who *Bouquet* could help most—those who are just starting to explore polyamory—often feel vulnerable or even threatened. Even experienced polyamorists may feel vulnerable or threatened during times of stress in the relationship. This can lead them to take the exact extreme interpretation of *Bouquet* that might sabotage their progress towards the ideal of polyamory, limiting the ability of relationships that are based on *Bouquet* to achieve that ideal.

The Primary/Secondary Model

Bouquet's most well-known contribution to the culture and language of Neo-Pagan polyamory is the primary/secondary model. *Bouquet* divides relationships into two classes, which it calls “primary” and “secondary.” Given that these terms are so central to *Bouquet's* advice, it is unfortunate that the document does not define them explicitly. As a result, readers have often defined the terms in ways that are heavily influenced by their nervousness about opening up to a polyamorous relationship or their insecurity about relationships in general. Tainted by fear, the resulting definitions are inconsistent with ideally healthy and successful polyamorous relationships. In addition, the definitions will probably be inconsistent between individuals, each of whom has interpreted *Bouquet* through the filter of his or her own experiences. This hampers communication about polyamory, as people use the same terms, but may mean vastly different things.

² I refer to long-term and complex relationships as the ideal of polyamory, but I certainly don't mean to devalue simpler, shorter-term, or more casual relationships in the process. The beauty of polyamory is that we are free to create relationships of the depth and length that is most satisfying to all participants.

Defining “Primary” and “Secondary”

What implications could a reasonable person draw about the definition of “primary” and “secondary” from *Bouquet*? First, the primary relationship is always referred to in the singular. In addition, *Bouquet* refers once to, “both primaries,” but never to more than two primaries. It is reasonable to conclude that *Bouquet* is based on the assumption of a single primary relationship between two people.³ I refer to this assumption as the “highlander postulate.”⁴ The highlander postulate means that, in the primary/secondary model, “there can be only one” primary relationship. This is consistent with the definition of the word “primary”: “of first rank or importance or value” (Merriam-Webster online dictionary). There can only be one “first” of anything. Secondary relationships, on the other hand, are often pluralized in *Bouquet*. The structure of a primary/secondary relationship as described in *Bouquet* can be visualized as a primary pair with one or more secondary relationships branching off of each primary.

Although this is one way of structuring a polyamorous relationship, it’s important to acknowledge that it’s not the only way. Some polyamorists prefer a more egalitarian group marriage structure, for example. In this structure, three or more participants have roughly equal priority in the relationship. Each is married to all of the others, as opposed to the primary/secondary model, in which the primaries are essentially married to each other, but not to the secondaries.

The guidelines given in *Bouquet* fail when applied to any structure other than primary/secondary. The semantics alone become unwieldy if they are applied to the group-marriage example. Are the participants in a group marriage all primary to each other? That would be contradictory to the definition of the word.

³ Although “Bouquet” does make one reference to a “triad” marriage, there are far more indications that the “primary” relationship is singular and consists of two people.

⁴ Just in case you missed it, this is a reference to the “Highlander” movies and TV show, in which a race of immortals must hunt down and kill each other (via beheading—the only way to kill an immortal), each one absorbing the mystic energy of his or her victims, until only one is left, who becomes the ultimate immortal and rules the world. The tagline of the series is, “There can be only one!” For me, this conjures up hilarious images of a score of secondaries trying to hunt down and take the head of whomever is currently the primary so that they can take the primary’s place in the relationship. Although, in reality, killing is hardly ever involved, this is not totally inconsistent with how some people implement the primary/secondary structure.

Re-Defining “Primary” and “Secondary”

When faced with this conflict, polyamorists sometimes attempt to redefine “primary” and “secondary” to make the *Bouquet* model fit with what they’re actually doing. For example, I know a person who redefines “primary” as, roughly, “spouse” and “secondary” as, roughly, “dating.” This stems from his disagreement with *Bouquet’s* assumption of a single primary pair (he is currently adding a third member to the marriage between himself and his wife, and refers to both himself and the other man as primaries).

While redefinition can alleviate the strain of trying to apply primary/secondary to relationships that don’t match its conditions, I believe that it would be better to create one’s own structure instead of trying to squeeze one’s relationships into a structure that doesn’t fit them. Given that terms such as “spouse,” and, “dating,” are already well defined, and, despite their monogamous origins, closely match the types of relationships that polyamorists form, what is the benefit of using *Bouquet’s* terms instead?

Why “Primary” and “Secondary”

The language of *Bouquet* supports the proposition that the primary relationship is intended to be roughly equal to marriage, and that the secondary relationship(s) are considered to be roughly equal to dating, with the important caveat that *Bouquet’s* language implicitly allows for one primary relationship, containing two participants, whereas marriage can include more than two participants.⁵ What is the significance of the use of the terms “primary” and “secondary” instead of more universally-defined terms like “spouse” and “dating?”

Outside of the context of *Bouquet*, the purpose of the terms, “primary” and “secondary” is to order things. The primary comes first, the secondary comes next; the primary is highest in terms of value or importance, the secondary is below the primary. By adopting these terms to describe the two categories of relationship, *Bouquet* makes the ranking of the relationship its major defining characteristic. Compare that to terms such as “spouse,” “fiancée,” “dating,” and so on, which primarily convey information about the intimacy and commitment level of the relationship. Certainly, one could infer some ranking from these terms (a spouse would probably be assumed to be a more committed and

⁵ Not legally, obviously, but the concept of “group marriage” has been around for a long time.

intimate relationship than a date), but ranking is not their primary purpose, while it is the primary purpose of the words “primary” and “secondary.”

Words carry levels of meaning that go deeper than their dictionary definitions. We can learn about an author’s intentional or unintentional biases by examining the choice of terms that he or she uses. The use of the terms “primary” and “secondary” could be interpreted to mean that, from the perspective of *Bouquet*, the most important characteristic of a relationship is whether or not that relationship comes before any other relationships that might exist. These terms reinforce the dominance of the primary relationship over the secondary ones. Secondaries are constantly reminded, each time they are referred to as such, that they are less important than the primary relationship. Mutual respect is one of the foundations of a healthy relationship, but it’s impossible to feel respected when you are constantly being reminded that you’re a second-class citizen. In this way, the language of the primary/secondary model is contradictory to forming the healthy, long-term, complex relationships that are the ideal of polyamory.

Transitory and Diminutive Secondaries

As the previous section explored, one effect of the terms “primary” and “secondary” is to dissuade the secondaries from getting any aspirations of ever being as important in the relationship as the primaries are to each other. This is not an unintended side-effect. Rather, *Bouquet* contains many passages and terms that reinforce the superiority of the primary relationship and the generally transitive and diminutive nature of the secondary relationship. Secondary partners are called, “satellite relationships,” and, “sweeties.” “Sweetie” is a diminutive adjective, and “satellite” suggests a large amount of distance.

Not only is this potentially insulting to the secondary (unless he or she is okay with just perpetually being a “sweetie” and a “satellite”), but it doesn’t reflect the realistic growth and natural progression that a relationship experiences. Instead, the primary/secondary model creates a binary dichotomy in which a relationship is either totally superior or ultimately disposable. Even if they start out as “sweeties,” people usually don’t stay that way forever. A polyamorous philosophy should support and encourage this progress, but *Bouquet* contains no provisions for upgrading a secondary to primary status, possibly because the idea of multiple primaries is antithetical to its model of a single primary relationship, consisting of two partners.

Moving beyond the semantic, *Bouquet* explicitly places absolute priority on protecting the primary relationship against harm from the secondary relationships, but has few contingencies to protect the secondary relationships against harm from the primary. An extreme interpretation of *Bouquet* could lead one to believe that secondary relationships are completely disposable, as evidenced by the following quotes, which I refer to as “veto clauses”:

“Never put energy into any Secondary relationships when there is an active conflict within the Primary. This has to be bedrock or the Primary will eventually fold. ... [T]his rule...should be followed with scrupulous integrity.”

“If a Secondary becomes destructive to the Primary partnership, one of the Primary partners can ask the other to terminate the threatening Secondary relationship.”

“It is a good idea for Primary partners to have an agreed upon set of signals or a formally stated phrase to politely request their Primary to **postpone or cancel the secondary assignation** so that the energy can be put into the Primary relationship for fence mending or bonding.”

Although *Bouquet* later goes on to point out that the two primaries should not abuse the power granted by the veto clauses, the focus of that admonition is entirely on protecting the primary relationship, and not at all on protecting the feelings of the secondary partner and the health of the secondary relationship. In other words, *Bouquet* seems to say, “Don’t abuse the veto clauses because if you do, it’ll piss off your primary partner,” not, “Don’t abuse the veto clauses because if you do, it’ll piss off your primary partner and harm the secondary relationship.” Any polyamorous relationship that is built on the primary/secondary model contains this potential for abuse: the secondary relationship is respected only until one of the primaries decides to hold up *Bouquet* and say, “This is how the book says we do it. Stop seeing your other lovers right now because I feel that we need to work on us.”

Consider the case where a husband and wife have been married for ten years and the husband has had a secondary relationship with another woman for nine months. Nine months is sufficient time for a level of commitment and intimacy to develop, and at this point, the secondary woman is almost certainly more than just a “date” to the “primary” man. Clearly, he does not consider her to be

disposable, but this is just how the primary/secondary model's veto clauses would treat her. This is acceptable to *Bouquet*, since it views secondaries as generally diminutive and transitory; it is unacceptable to those who want to take advantage of the infinite spectrum of commitment and intimacy of which humans are capable.

It is impossible to achieve the ideal of polyamory—especially the long-term quality—in a model that forces all relationships except the primary to be ultimately disposable. Of course, all relationships can be ended (anybody who's been dumped against their will can testify to this), but *Bouquet* systematically subjugates and devalues secondary relationships in its attempt to protect the primary. Any person who views their partners as more than a “sweetie” and a “satellite” should consider carefully whether the primary/secondary model is appropriate for them.

Assumptions and Omissions In “Bouquet”

A close analysis of *Bouquet* reveals possible assumptions about relationships that may not hold in every case. In addition, the primary/secondary model overlooks several important aspects that can be present in polyamorous relationships.

Secondaries As Threats

Bouquet seems to treat the secondary relationship(s) mostly as a threat to the primary relationship. It contains a great deal of advice about how primaries can avoid letting secondaries mess up the good thing that they've already got. It's true that the extra stress of polyamory sometimes results in damage to a previously-monogamous relationship. In general, polyamorous relationships are more difficult to negotiate than monogamous ones, if only because they contain more people. But *Bouquet* seems to be too focused on the potential harm that secondaries can cause and overlooks their potential to help support and maintain both the primary and secondary relationships.

In pursuit of the goal of protecting the primaries against the secondaries, *Bouquet* defines what I call the veto clauses (quoted above). These clauses, if interpreted literally, give either primary essentially complete veto power over the other primary's ability to contribute to and sustain a given secondary relationship. It's true that every relationship can be ended at any time, by any of its participants. The mitigating factor is usually that the participants in the

relationship won't throw away their investment in the relationship by ending it on a whim. The veto clauses are flawed in that they give complete power to end the secondary relationship to a primary who has minimal investment in the secondary relationship. This is a dramatic and unjust imbalance. A rational secondary might respond by reducing his or her investment in the polyamorous relationship, preventing the formation of the long-term, complex relationships that are the ideal of polyamory.⁶

For all its advice about protecting and strengthening the primary relationship, *Bouquet* does not address the possibility that the secondary relationship can be helpful and supportive of the primary relationship. This is a significant omission, since an expanded social support structure can be one of the biggest advantages of polyamory. Instead of acknowledging that the secondary can play a role in maintaining the primary relationship, *Bouquet* is filled with language and provisions designed to isolate the primary relationship from the secondary under the guise of protection. As long as a primary/secondary dichotomy exists, the secondary cannot be an fully active participant in a mutual, multi-way relationship. He or she can only be a "satellite," or a "sweetie." Ideal polyamory is not limited in this way. Both primaries and secondaries are worse off for the limitations imposed by that model.

Shutting Out Secondaries

Instead of making the secondary an active participant in the maintenance and support of the primary relationship, *Bouquet* seems to operate on the assumption that, when there is trouble in the primary relationship, both primaries need to close off from their secondary relationships and focus on each other for "fence mending or bonding." Of course, sometimes the partners in a relationship need isolate themselves in order to focus on their relationship, but it's significant that *Bouquet* presents this as a required condition of addressing problems between the primaries. It states, "Never put energy into any Secondary relationships when there is an active conflict within the Primary."⁷

⁶ My analysis is based on the assumption that the "secondary" relationship exists between one "primary" and the "secondary" partner. If a relationship exists between both "primaries" and the "secondary" (more of a triangle structure), then both "primaries" have investment in and incentive to maintain the "secondary" relationship. Realistically, both of these situations occur. The first is more harmful than the second.

⁷ Underlining added for emphasis.

When a relationship between lovers—polyamorous or monogamous—has problems, no one expects them to stop seeing their friends, their business associates, or their family members in order to participate in “fence mending or bonding” with each other. In fact, it’s normal for people to take advantage of their social support structure in times of strife. She cries on her best friend’s shoulder; his best friend takes him out for a beer. (Or maybe he cries and she drinks... let’s not be sexist.) They talk it over, get an outside perspective, blow off some steam, cool down a little, get some perspective, get some advice, and so on, and the relationship is better off for it. Why, then, is an active, loving participant in a polyamorous relationship different from a friend, a sister, a brother, or a mother, in that the secondary must be excluded when the primary relationship has problems? There is an obvious conflict between that precept and the goal of *Bouquet*, and polyamory in general: to create multiple, simultaneous, loving relationships.

Reward-Without-Risk

The veto clauses have led some to interpret *Bouquet’s* version of polyamory as essentially, “monogamy with benefits.” Both primary partners are allowed to behave as if they were polyamorous, unless the primary relationship is threatened, in which case the relationship becomes functionally monogamous again until the threat passes or is resolved. It’s almost as if *Bouquet* is trying to give polyamorists their cake and let them eat it too. It wants to give them the benefits of polyamory without any risk to their pre-existing relationship. I refer to this idea as “reward-without-risk.”⁸ A truly polyamorous relationship cannot be based on a core of monogamy. The primary/secondary structure fails to achieve the ideal of polyamory, since it ultimately keeps the secondaries on the outside.

An Inherent Ultimatum

The highlander postulate creates a situation in which the growth of the relationship between a primary and a secondary inherently represents a threat to the other primary. Since the highlander postulate requires that exactly one primary relationship be superior, and all others (secondaries) are ultimately disposable, if a secondary relationship becomes more important than the primary relationship, the only option is for the primary relationship to be

⁸ It should be understood that, in the context of this paper, this term refers specifically to “Bouquet’s” perceived attempt to create a structure in which polyamorists can reap some of the rewards of polyamory without the corresponding risk to their pre-existing relationship.

demoted to secondary, potentially completely negating any investment that the partners might have in that relationship. Primary/secondary contains an inherent ultimatum: if a secondary becomes too important, the primary must choose between either denying the natural growth of the secondary relationship or potentially dishonoring the covenant of the pre-existing primary relationship.

In the primary/secondary structure, primaries are motivated to keep secondaries from becoming even close to as important as the primaries themselves (which is consistent with the “diminutive and transient secondaries” conclusion). Since primary/secondary only grants security to the primaries, the only way primaries can maintain security is by keeping secondaries down!⁹ This is contrary to the long-term, complex, intimate relationships that are the ideal of polyamory. Additionally, it does not reflect the real ways in which people are capable of expressing their emotion. Parents don’t feel the need to pick one “primary” child and treat all their other children as “secondary.” (“Jimmy, I can’t take you to soccer practice today because I’m having an active conflict with Tommy, and Tommy is primary.”) We are obviously capable of carrying on multiple loving relationships with many people at the same time. Polyamorous relationships should reflect this ideal, and should receive the maximum level of commitment and intimacy that is desirable to, negotiated by, and sustainable by all partners.

Protecting the Primary Relationship

The veto clauses spring from an admirable goal: to protect the primary partners’ existing investment in their relationship while allowing them to safely invest in new relationships. It is critical to honor the covenants of existing relationships when building new ones, but the protection offered by the veto clauses is false. Safety in a relationship comes from the honor, integrity, and commitment of the people in the relationship. It comes from a mutual faith that the other partner(s) will act in the best interests of one’s self and the relationship. Terms of the relationship are continually negotiated, either

⁹ This arrangement makes me think of the television show, “Survivor.” “Survivor” is a reality TV show in which contestants are flown to a remote location and forced into subsistence living. Each week, one contestant (the contestant who helped the least, pissed everybody off, looks like he or she has a good shot of winning, etc...) is voted “off the island” and has to go home. Later seasons of “Survivor” introduced the idea of immunity—that by winning a certain contest each week, one contestant could be immune from being voted off the island that week. In primary/secondary, the primary has perpetual immunity and secondaries are always at risk of being voted off the island (out of the relationship). To make matters worse, it only takes one vote (that of the “other” primary) to kick the secondary out!

explicitly or implicitly, and each party trusts the other to respect those terms. That is the covenant of the relationship.

Bouquet's veto clauses seem to be based on the fear that one partner will break that covenant. But if a partner lacks the honor, integrity, and commitment to respect the covenant of the relationship, into which they have invested time and energy, then why would they bother to respect the covenant of *Bouquet*, an external structure in which they may have little or no investment. On the other hand, if the partners have honor, integrity, and commitment to sustaining the relationship, then veto clauses are unnecessary. Honor, integrity, and commitment will cause them to voluntarily take steps to maintain the covenant, whatever those steps might be.

Resolving Conflicts Through Exclusion

Another failing of the veto clauses is that they provide only one means for resolving conflicts within the primary relationship or between the primaries and a secondary—specifically, elimination of the secondary.¹⁰ Consider the case where a husband and wife have been married for ten years and the wife has had a secondary relationship with another man for nine months. If the husband and wife begin to fight all the time (an active conflict within the primary relationship), *Bouquet* requires that they “never put energy into any secondary relationship.” Obviously, this is overly simplistic and unrealistic. It’s said that, “when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” When all you have is *Bouquet*, every problem ultimately results in the elimination of secondary relationships, which is inconsistent with the ideals of polyamory.

There are far better approaches to solving problems in polyamorous relationships—solutions that honor the value of all partners’ investment in the relationship—but these solutions are harder to describe and more difficult to implement than *Bouquet's*. Nevertheless, if a polyamorous relationship is to achieve its ideal state, its participants must take up the challenge of finding these solutions and implementing them. The goal should not be protecting the primary at all costs (reward-without-risk). Rather, the potential rewards of a healthy polyamorous relationship should be enough for the members of the pre-

¹⁰ *Bouquet* acknowledges that should not be considered the sole source for information on polyamorous relationships, but its prominence accentuates the import given to its ideas to the point that they sometimes outshine other possibilities. Hence, “eliminate the secondary” is sometimes seen as the first or only option, especially by a primary who feels threatened by his or her spouse’s secondary relationship.

existing relationship to mutually accept the risk of opening it up to polyamory. Anyone who is not willing to accept that risk is not suited for polyamory.

Risk-Without-Reward

The mutual risk of polyamory is an important concept that I think deserves some elaboration. In a monogamous relationship, one partner is often asked to give something up so that the other partner can benefit. The sacrifice is usually not completely selfless, nor should it be. For example, consider the case where a husband takes a second job so that his wife can go back to college. On a practical level, he may expect to benefit from her increased salary once she graduates. But even if he doesn't have any expectation of practical benefit (maybe she's studying a subject that doesn't pay well, simply for her own enjoyment), he probably expects that his wife will appreciate his sacrifice, resulting in an increase in the strength of their relationship. That reward alone may be enough, to him, to offset the cost of his sacrifice.

In a polyamorous relationship, however, it is more likely to occur that a partner is asked to make a sacrifice or accept a risk to a pre-existing relationship without an expectation of commensurate practical reward. One partner forming a new relationship will probably require that the other partner make some accommodations, if only in terms of scheduling; a new relationship represents some degree of risk to a pre-existing relationship, since it might upset the previously-stable structure that the partners had negotiated or bring to a boil any problems in the relationship that had been simmering below the surface. In this case, both partners equally share the risk to the pre-existing relationship that the new relationship might cause, but the partner who is forming the new relationship stands to reap the majority of the benefit. I refer to this concept—that a polyamorous person will probably be asked to make concessions or accept risks that their partner takes with little or no expectation of practical reward—as “risk-without-reward” (as opposed to primary/secondary’s “reward-without-risk”).

In the situation described above, someone who had not fully embraced the polyamorous lifestyle might be tempted to think, “What am I getting out of your new lover? Hell no, you can't fall in love with that woman! I am your primary and she had better not try to take my place.” This line of reasoning, this aversion to risk-without-reward, seems to underlie the primary/secondary model. And from the primary/secondary perspective, it makes complete sense! Only the primary's security is ensured; secondaries are ultimately disposable;

there can be only one primary: therefore, primaries must live in fear that another person will take their place and steal all of the security that they have worked for. Ideal polyamory requires that the participants embrace risk-without-reward. Specifically, it requires that the participants be willing to allow one partner to expose the relationship to risks without the other partner having any real expectation of practical reward. That's not to say that there is never any practical reward, but that the other partner must acknowledge that possibility and accept the risk anyway.

In fact, "risk-without-reward" is inaccurate. Realistically, the one partner does gain some reward by allowing the "other" partner to take risks with the relationship. Robert Heinlein defined love as, "[T]hat condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own." Using this definition, inasmuch as the partners in a polyamorous relationship love each other, they will be rewarded by increased happiness when their partner's happiness is increased by another relationship. To use the example above, the wife's reward will be that she is happy to see her husband made happier by his new relationship. Ideally, her acceptance of the new relationship's risk, and any sacrifices that she makes to accommodate it, will also result in a strengthening of her relationship with her husband.

A Real-World Example

Twice in my life, I have been in the position described above: where I wanted to add a new partner alongside an existing relationship. In the first case, I had become deeply infatuated with Susan,* at the same time as I had a long-standing relationship with Mary, who was married to another man. At that time, Mary and I defined our relationship according to the primary/secondary structure. I was a secondary to Mary, who was a primary with her husband. As I had no other long-term relationships, I considered Mary to be my primary, although I did not consider myself to be hers. Interestingly, although Mary gave me levels of commitment and intimacy that were in some ways indistinguishable from those that she gave to her husband, the highlander postulate prevented me from seeing myself as anything more than a secondary.

* All names in this document are changed to protect the privacy of the individuals. Unless you know me, in which case you probably know all of this stuff already. ☺ On the other hand, If you do know me, don't assume you know who these people are—you might be wrong!

Based on the highlander postulate, I decided that, since Mary already had a primary (her husband), she could never be considered to be my primary unless I replaced him as her primary—something which neither she nor I desired. *Bouquet's* “disposable secondary” language led me to further conclude that the only way I could have security in a relationship would be to find a relationship in which I could be considered to be a primary. I knew that, like anyone, I deserved security in a relationship, and so decided that it was acceptable to demote Mary from my primary to my secondary and put Susan in her place. Since Susan could requite the primary status that I gave to her and Mary couldn't, I gave Susan higher priority. Since I couldn't have two primaries (highlander postulate again), Mary had to be demoted. I justified this by concluding that, as long as I couldn't be Mary's primary, why should she have any expectation of being mine?

Of course, this was completely unjustified and not in keeping with the actual level of respect and commitment that Mary and I had. It resulted in enormous problems between us. Frankly, I owed her much more respect than my infatuation-crazed interpretation of the primary/secondary structure motivated me to give her. Thanks largely to our love and our mutual commitment to our relationship, we managed to survive my blunder.

By the second time this situation occurred, I had come to reject the primary/secondary model, for the reasons that I describe in this paper. My long-time friendship with Michelle blossomed into love and I realized that there was the potential for it to grow to the point where it might impinge upon my relationship with Mary. Freed of the inherent ultimatum imposed by the highlander postulate (either you are my primary and I am yours or you are my secondary and someone else comes before you), I was able to approach Mary from a position of respect for our relationship and compassion for her feelings. I explained that I wanted to pursue my relationship with Michelle, but I realized that doing so would affect the amount of time and energy I was able to give to her and would potentially put our relationship at risk. Even so, I felt that the happiness and fulfillment that I would derive from my relationship with Michelle was worth that risk, and I asked her to join me in taking that risk, even though she stood to gain very little from it, except the joy of seeing me more fulfilled. This shift in my attitude was instrumental. Reassured that I was acting out of respect for our relationship, and that there was no need for her to be demoted in order for Michelle's relationship to grow, Mary's sense of security was not threatened, and she was able to respond out of compassionate desire for my ultimate happiness and fulfillment. The result, at least so far, has actually

been a strengthening of my relationship with Mary and an increase in my dedication to our relationship. I anticipate that this will continue into the long-term.

Frankly, there are many similarities between my relationship with Susan and my relationship with Michelle. In both cases, I saw the potential for much more than a casual relationship—a relationship that could approach levels of intimacy and commitment equal to those that I have with Mary. When, with Susan, I approached this from the primary/secondary mindset, Mary felt threatened. By my demoting her to secondary, I made her ultimately disposable, which she rightly rejected. When, with Michelle, I approached it from a position of respect for our existing relationship, and without the inherent ultimatum that primary/secondary imposes, she was able to respond from a position of security and compassionate desire for my ultimate happiness and fulfillment.

The Illusion Of Safety

In the movie, “Fight Club,” the character Tyler Durden talks about the “illusion of safety.”

TYLER

“If you are seated in an emergency exit row, and you feel you would be unable or unwilling to perform duties listed on safety card, please ask a flight attendant to reseat you.”

Jack turns to see Tyler. Tyler is reading a safety INSTRUCTION CARD.

JACK

It's a lot of responsibility.

TYLER

Wanna switch seats?

JACK

No, I'm not sure I'm the man for that particular job.

TYLER

An exit-door procedure at 30,000 feet. Mm-hmm.
The illusion of safety.

JACK

Yeah, I guess so.

TYLER

You know why they put oxygen masks on planes?

JACK

So you can breathe.

TYLER

Oxygen, gets you high. In a catastrophic emergency, we're taking giant, panicked breaths. Suddenly you become euphoric, docile, you accept your fate.

Tyler points to passive faces on the drawn figures on the INSTRUCTION CARD.

TYLER

Emergency water landing, 600 miles per hour. Blank faces - calm as Hindu cows.

My interpretation of this idea is that people are comforted by things that make them feel safe, especially when the situation that they are in is fundamentally unsafe, regardless of the actual effectiveness of the purported safety measures. In a water landing, (the flight attendant euphemism for crashing into a body of water) the airplane will likely hit the water at hundreds of miles per hour. The water will hit the plane just as hard as concrete or dirt would, probably disintegrating it. Yet the picture on the safety card shows an intact plane blithely floating in a calm sea while passengers step out onto the wing and release the rafts. It's as if the plane decided to go out for a swim! "No thanks," said the passengers, "we'll get off here!"

I acknowledge that exit-door procedures and safety cards have some practical benefit. For example, in a case where a fire occurred in the cabin while the plane was still taxiing to the runway, the plane was stopped, and exit doors and inflatable ramps were used to evacuate the passengers. But these safety measures provide far more comfort to most passengers than they rationally should—the illusion of safety. Just as the flight safety card provides the illusion of safety for airline passengers, *Bouquet* provides the illusion of safety for polyamorists. The primary/secondary model is rooted in large part in the fear that, by opening a pre-existing, apparently-stable relationship to polyamory, that relationship will be damaged. This is a valid fear.

A Rational Response To Fear

One rational response to fear is to take steps to minimize the probability of the feared event occurring. *Bouquet* attempts to do this through the veto clauses,

but I submit that a partner who can choose to dishonor his or her commitment to a pre-existing relationship will also be likely to dishonor his or her commitment to the veto clauses. Specifically, he or she may agree to the veto clauses but then fail to abide by them if and when they are invoked. After all, commitment to one's partner and personal honor are the qualities that would motivate one to abide by the veto clauses of *Bouquet*. If these qualities are present, they alone should motivate one to sustain the primary relationship, and the veto clauses are unnecessary. If they are absent, then the veto clauses have no power anyway: the illusion of safety.

Some have acknowledged that point, but have argued that the comfort and security that the veto clauses provide are beneficial, even if they are false. I disagree with this argument. The false comfort and security that are provided by the veto clauses may prevent the primary from seeking measures that can provide real comfort and security. With the primary/secondary model providing the illusion of safety, one may be less motivated to do the work of taking steps that would legitimately strengthen the relationship and make it more resistant to disruption: strengthening one's self-esteem, bonding with one's partner, communicating openly and honestly, and so forth. In addition, the primary/secondary structure can be interpreted in ways that are actively harmful to secondaries and are incompatible with the ideals of polyamory. Given that, any false comfort that it offers to primaries is unjustified.

I hold up my experience with Mary and Susan in support of the idea that the safety offered by the veto clauses is false. That situation was exactly the kind of situation against which the veto clauses are designed to protect, but they were no match for my infatuation with Susan! When Mary asked me to stop seeing Susan, I was so infatuated with her and filled with self-righteousness (born from my belief that I was entitled to a primary) that I didn't follow through. Although I obeyed the letter of the veto clauses by ceasing to be lovers with Susan, I continued to try to promote her over Mary, hurting my relationship with Mary further. Fortunately, I was eventually able to see the depth of the hurt that I was causing to Mary. Immediately, the health of that relationship took precedence over my desire to have a relationship with Susan. In the end, it was my love for Mary and my commitment to our relationship, and not the veto clauses, that made me see the error of my ways. Without that love and commitment, the veto clauses were powerless.

“Bouquet’s” Bias

Given the potential flaws in the primary/secondary model, it is surprising to me that it is not more widely criticized. While I have found many polyamorists who follow and espouse *Bouquet*, I have found almost none who have recognized the potential flaws that I have described in this document. I believe that this is because *Bouquet* contains an inherent bias towards the primary relationship, as I have described in this paper. In my experience, most polyamorists have a primary relationship, which means that *Bouquet* is biased in their favor and minimizes their incentive to find fault with it. When they participate in polyamorous relationships, they act as secondaries, but they always have a primary to go home to.

Bouquet’s flaws become more obvious when it is considered from the perspective of a person who acts exclusively in the role of a secondary—who does not benefit from *Bouquet’s* bias. Although *Bouquet* recognizes the necessity of security to the formation of a long-term, complex relationship, its provisions grant that security only to the primary relationship. The secondary must accept that his or her relationship can be terminated at any time, potentially because of problems within the primary relationship—events over which he or she has absolutely no control. This is completely unfair to the secondary and removes any incentive that a self-respecting person would have to invest more than trivially in the relationship.

In Closing

I would never say that all primaries are harming their secondaries, or that no secondary can have self-respect. I feel that a literal and extreme interpretation of *Bouquet* prohibits healthy polyamorous relationships, but I have never met anybody who takes that interpretation one hundred percent of the time. Among those who choose the primary/secondary model, all that I have met respect their secondaries’ investment in the relationship. I have almost never seen nor heard of the veto clauses actually being invoked. The failure of *Bouquet* is that it contains the potential for a catastrophic misinterpretation. While a reasonable person probably would not enforce an extreme interpretation of *Bouquet*, when a person feels that a long-standing relationship is threatened, reason can fail, and the catastrophic and fatal misinterpretation of *Bouquet* is more likely to be invoked.

The primary/secondary model is *Bouquet's* one flaw, but it is a fatal flaw. Those who follow it put a sword of Damocles over the secondary's head—hardly a situation that motivates the secondary to cleave to the primaries and create the long-term, complex relationships that are the ideal of polyamory. Unfortunately, many people accept the primary/secondary model anyway. Some do so because they know of no other alternatives. Others do so because the flaws of the primary/secondary model are not immediately obvious, especially from the perspective of a primary. I hope that this paper has provided an alternative perspective on *Bouquet* and the primary/secondary model.

I would like to acknowledge that it is somewhat unfair of me to spend twenty pages pointing out the pitfalls of the primary/secondary structure without suggesting any alternatives of my own. At least Morning Glory gave something to the polyamorous community. From one perspective, all I have done is poke holes in her creation without contributing anything myself. In that respect, I consider this paper to be incomplete. A complete version would include at least as many pages describing ways of creating ideal polyamorous relationships.

Although I have ideas about what makes a successful polyamorous relationship, they are unfortunately not yet mature enough for me to subject them to the criticism that they would receive if they were included in this paper. I perceive that primaries and secondaries are adopting *Bouquet's* model without being fully aware of its potential weaknesses. By the time they discover the weaknesses for themselves, it may be too late. Therefore, I feel that this paper's message is urgent enough that it is justified for me to distribute it "incomplete." I hope to describe my ideas about what makes a successful polyamorous relationship in a later document.

Appendix: A Bouquet of Lovers

This paper discusses polyamory in general, but specifically discusses many ideas found in “Bouquet.” Although I expect that “Bouquet” will be familiar to many readers, I present its full text here for those who have not read it, or for those who have read it and want to refresh their memory.

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“Bouquet” begins on the following page.

A Bouquet of Lovers
Strategies for Responsible Open Relationships
by Morning Glory Zell

Article originally appeared in Green Egg #89, Beltane 1990

You want to know how it will be,
Me and her, or you and me.
You both sit there, your long hair flowing,
Eyes alive, your mind still growing,
Saying to me: What can we do,
Now that we both love you?
I love you too. I don't really see,
Why can't we go on as three?

"Triad" by David Crosby

Let us begin with the *a priori* assumption that the reader is either currently practicing or firmly committed to the concept of Open Relationships as a conscious and loving lifestyle. If you are not in that category then this article will probably not be of interest to you. If you are full of curiosity about the potentials of Open Relationships, there are resources which deal with such soul-searching issues as jealousy management and theories about why the whole lifestyle is healthy and positive. Some of these resources will be given at the end and herein there will also be found considerable points of interest.

The goal of a responsible Open Relationship is to cultivate ongoing, long-term, complex relationships which are rooted in deep mutual friendships.

What elements enable an Open Relationship to be successful? Having been involved all my adult life in one or the other Open Marriages (the current Primary being [at the time the article was written] 16 years long), I have seen a lot of ideas come and go and experimented with plans and rules to make these relationships work for everyone involved. There is as much variety in what different people require in a relationship as there are people involved in them. However, there are some sure-fire elements that must be present for the system to function at all and there are other elements that are strongly recommended on the basis that they have a very good track record. Let us refer to them collectively as the "Rules of the Road."

Rules of the Road

The first two are essential. I have never met anyone who has had a serious and healthy Open Marriage that omitted these first two principles. They are: **Honesty and Openness about the polyamorous lifestyle.** Having multiple sexual relations

while lying to your partners or trying to pretend that each one is the "one true love" is a very superficial and selfishly destructive way to live.

There are marriages in which one of the partners will state: "If you ever have an affair, I never want to find out about it." I suppose some folks take that as tacit permission the same way a child will connive when the parent tells them "Don't ever let me catch you doing such-and-so!" Without complete honesty, especially about sexual issues, the relationship is doomed. Some Open Relations have an agreement not to discuss the details of their satellite relations with their Primary partner or vice-versa, but there still must be the fundamental honesty and agreement that other relations do exist and are important to maintain.

The next principle mentioned is equally fundamental:

All partners involved in the Multiple Relations must fully and willingly embrace the basic commitment to a polyamorous lifestyle. A situation where one partner seeks polygamy and the other one insists upon monogamy or strongly politics for it will not work, for this is too much of a fundamental disagreement to allow the relationship to prosper. Sooner or later someone has got to give in and have it one way or the other. The truth is that people usually do have a strong preference.

**Hogamus, Higamus, Men Are Polygamous
Higamus, Hogamus, Women Monogamous**

The only reason such mixed marriages have actually worked has been because there was an all powerful church/state taboo enforced on options other than monogamy. In a patriarchy, men's deviation from that norm is ignored and women's is punished, often by death. The first recorded gender-specific law, in the ancient code of Urukagina from 2400 BCE, was directed against women who practiced polyandry, specifying that their teeth be bashed in with bricks. Now that the social codes are being challenged, even though the state maintains laws against legal plural marriage, both men and women are more free to explore alternative preferences and relationships are conspicuously in a period of flux.

When I first met and fell in love with my present Primary partner, I roused myself sufficiently from my bedazzled emotional state to say: "I love you, but I hope that we can somehow have an Open Relationship because I am not really suited to monogamy and would be very unhappy in a monogamous relationship." Fortunately, Otter was delighted to hear this as he had been too afraid of losing the new-found bliss to broach the subject first.

Many a relationship has foundered on the rock of Higamus-Hogamus. Nevertheless, the sooner it gets dealt with the better chance for the relationship to survive. It also means a quicker and kinder death to a romance if this basic agreement cannot be

reached. Honesty and willing Polyamorous Commitment are the basic building blocks all partners must use to build a lasting Open Relationship.

Once over that hurdle, next comes a set of ground rules for conducting the relationships. Any relationship profits by ground rules, even a one night stand. Nowadays, the state of sexuality being risky, such considerations are more than a politeness; they can be a lifesaver.

Never put energy into any Secondary relationships when there is an active conflict within the Primary. This has to be bedrock or the Primary will eventually fold.

The difficulty with this rule is that if both partners are not equally committed to the openness of the relationship, it can be used as a gun in their disagreements. By deliberately picking a fight just before Primary A goes to see a Secondary sweetie, Primary B can control her spouse and prevent him from ever having successful Secondary relations. This behavior is fraught with dishonesty and secret monogamous agendas; if it is persistently indulged in, it is symptomatic of a fundamental problem with the basic principles.

If Partner B plays this game with Partner A's satellite assignments while continuing to pursue his own, B is an out and out hypocrite and needs to be called on his bullshit in no uncertain terms!

Nevertheless, this rule is the safety valve for sanity and preservation of Primary relationships and should be followed with scrupulous integrity. It is a good idea for Primary partners to have an agreed upon set of signals or a formally stated phrase to politely request their Primary to postpone or cancel the secondary assignment so that the energy can be put into the Primary relationship for fence mending or bonding. This ritualized request can be structured so as to avoid loaded terminology and to decrease the negative emotional charge. Frivolous use of this signal is very destructive of it, as is refusal to participate in healing when access to the Primary partner has been obtained.

Territorial jealousy has no place in a polyamorous agreement. However situational jealousy can arise over issues in the relationship when one or more of the partners is feeling neglected. Obviously the best cure for neglect is to focus attention on what has been neglected; the relationship will prosper when all partners are feeling strong and positive about each other. From that strong and healthy center it becomes possible to extend the love to others.

Consult with the Primary partner before becoming sexually involved with a new long term Secondary lover. The Primary partner must approve of the new person and feel good about them and not feel threatened by the new relationship. Nothing can break up a relationship faster than bringing in a new person that is hostile or inconsiderate to the other Primary partner. On the other hand, the most precious people in my life

are the lovers that my Primary partner has brought home to become our mutual life-long friends.

The check and balance on this rule is how often it is invoked by the same person. If it is used all the time by one person, this is patently unfair and is symptomatic of a problem or need that must be addressed. This can be tricky and once again, if honesty is not impeccably observed, the rule can be abused. If a man has a hard time relating to other men for instance, he can use his alienation to pick apart every other lover his wife proposes on some ground or other, leaving her with no satellite relationship that is acceptable to him. The cure for this is for the person who has the problem relating to the same sex to seek a therapy group for people who want to overcome this alienation.

Different rules may be used to apply to one night stands or other temporary love affairs. One-night-stands are not necessarily frowned upon and can be a memorable experience, but some Primaries choose to not allow any such brief flings as too risky, while others feel that such happenings add spice and are especially welcome during business trips or other enforced separations. The "ask first" rule may be suspended for the duration of the separation.

All new potential lovers are immediately told of any existing Primary relationship so that they genuinely understand the primacy of that existing relationship. None of this hiding your wedding ring business! Satellite lovers have a right to know where e they truly stand and must not have any false illusions or hidden agendas of their own. For instance, in a triadic relationship of two women and one man, there is occasionally a solitary satellite lover who wants to "cut that little filly right out of the herd." If satellite lovers are really seeking a monogamous relationship then they will not be satisfied with the role of a long term Secondary relationship, and it is better that they find this out before any damage is done to either side.

If a Secondary becomes destructive to the Primary partnership, one of the Primary partners can ask the other to terminate the threatening Secondary relationship. It is wise to limit this veto to the initial phase of Secondary relationship formation. After a Secondary relationship has existed over a year and a day, any difficulties with the partner's Secondary must be worked out with everyone's cooperation. If you are not all friends by that time, then you are not conducting your relationships in a very cooperative and loving manner. When all is said and done, what we are creating is extended families based on the simple fact that lovers will come through for you more than friends will.

An additional complication can arise with the variable of alternate sexual preference. A bisexual woman I knew who was partnered to a man had to terminate a relationship with one of her female lovers because the Secondary lover was a lesbian who objected to the Primary relationship for political reasons. Another bisexual couple had a system whereby they were heterosexually monogamous and all their

satellite relationships were with members of the same sex. This elegant solution underwent considerable stress and eventual alteration with the advent of AIDS.

Staying Healthy

Venereal diseases have been the thorn in the rose of erotic love for centuries, but recently the thorn has developed some fatal venom. If open relationships are to survive, we must develop an impeccable honesty that will brook no hiding behind false modesty or squeamishness. We must be able to have an unshakeable faith in our Primary partners and a very high level of trust with any Secondary or other satellite relationships. This demands a tight knit community of mutual trust among lovers who are friends. A recent study yielded some sobering statistics: over 80% of the men and women queried said they would lie to a potential sex partner both about whether they were married as well as whether they had herpes or other S.T.D.s. All it takes is one such liar and the results can be pathological to all. Nowadays, anyone who feels that total honesty is "just not romantic" is courting disaster and anybody unfortunate enough to trust a person like this can drag a lot of innocent people down with their poor judgment.

In order to cope with this level of risk, a system has been evolving that we call The Condom Commitment. It works like this: you may have sex without condoms only with the other members of your Condom Commitment Cadre. All members of the Cadre must wear condoms with any outside lovers. The Condom Commitment begins with the Primary relationship where trust is absolute. Long-term Secondary lovers can join by mutual consent of both Primaries and any other Secondaries that already belong. If a person slips up and has an unprotected fling then they must go through a lengthy quarantine period, be tested for all S.T.D.s, then be accepted back in by complete consensus of the other members of the Cadre. The same drill applies if a condom breaks during intercourse with an outside lover.

Adherence to the Condom Commitment and to the other Rules of the Road may seem harsh and somewhat artificial at first, but they have evolved by way of floods of tears and many broken hearts. Alternative relationships can be filled with playful excitement, but it is not a game and people are not toys. The only way the system works is if everyone gets what they need. The rewards are so rich and wonderful that I personally can't imagine living any other way.

I feel that this whole polyamorous lifestyle is the avante garde of the 21st Century. Expanded families will become a pattern with wider acceptance as the monogamous nuclear family system breaks apart under the impact of serial divorces. In many ways, polyamorous extended relationships mimic the old multi-generational families before the Industrial Revolution, but they are better because the ties are voluntary and are, by necessity, rooted in honesty, fairness, friendship and mutual interests. Eros is, after all, the primary force that binds the universe together; so we must be

creative in the ways we use that force to evolve new and appropriate ways to solve our problems and to make each other and ourselves happy.

The magic words are still, after all: Perfect Love and Perfect Trust.