

Married, With Infidelities

By MARK OPPENHEIMER
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Last month, when the New York congressman Anthony Weiner finally admitted that he had lied, that his Twitter account had not been hacked, that he in fact had sent a picture of his thinly clad undercarriage to a stranger in Seattle, I asked my wife of six years, mother of our three children, what she thought. More specifically, I asked which would upset her more: to learn that I was sending racy self-portraits to random women, Weiner-style, or to discover I was having an actual affair. She paused, scrunched up her mouth as if she had just bitten a particularly sour lemon and said: "An affair is at least a normal human thing. But tweeting a picture of your crotch is just *weird*."

How do we account for that revulsion, which many shared with my wife, a revulsion that makes it hard to imagine a second act for Weiner, like Eliot Spitzer's television career or pretty much every day in the life of Bill Clinton? One explanation is that the Weiner scandal was especially sordid: drawn out, compounded daily with new revelations, covered up with embarrassing lies that made us want to look away. But another possibility is that there was something not weird, but too familiar about Weiner. His style might not be for everyone (to put it politely), but the impulse to be something other than what we are in our daily, monogamous lives, the thrill that comes from the illicit rather than the predictable, is something I imagine many couples can identify with. With his online flirtations and soft-porn photos, he did what a lot of us might do if we were lonely and determined to not really cheat.

That is one reason it was a relief when Weiner was drummed from office. In addition to giving us some good laughs, he forced us to ask particularly uncomfortable questions, like "what am I capable of doing?" and "what have my neighbors or friends done?" His visage was insisting, night after night, that we think about how hard monogamy is, how hard marriage is and about whether we make unrealistic demands on the institution and on ourselves.

That, anyway, is what Dan Savage, America's leading sex-advice columnist, would say. Although best known for his It Gets Better project, an archive of hopeful videos aimed at troubled gay youth, Savage has for 20 years been saying monogamy is harder than we admit and articulating a sexual ethic that he thinks honors the reality, rather than the romantic ideal, of marriage. In Savage Love, his weekly column, he inveighs against the American obsession with strict fidelity. In its place he proposes a sensibility that we might call American Gay Male, after that community's tolerance for pornography, fetishes and a variety of partnered arrangements, from strict monogamy to wide openness.

Savage believes monogamy is right for many couples. But he believes that our discourse about it, and about sexuality more generally, is dishonest. Some people need more than one partner, he writes, just as some people need flirting, others need to be whipped, others need lovers of both sexes. We can't help our urges, and we should not lie to our partners about them. In some marriages, talking honestly about our needs will forestall or obviate affairs; in other marriages, the conversation may lead to an affair, but with permission. In both cases, honesty is the best policy.

"I acknowledge the advantages of monogamy," Savage told me, "when it comes to sexual safety, infections, emotional safety, paternity assurances. But people in monogamous relationships have to be willing to meet me a quarter of the way and acknowledge the drawbacks of monogamy around boredom, despair, lack of variety, sexual death and being taken for granted."

The view that we need a little less fidelity in marriages is dangerous for a gay-marriage advocate to hold. It feeds into the stereotype of gay men as compulsively promiscuous, and it gives ammunition to all the forces, religious and otherwise, who say that gay families will never be real families and that we had better stop them before they ruin what is left of marriage. But Savage says a more flexible attitude within marriage may be just what the straight community needs. Treating monogamy, rather than honesty or joy or humor, as the main indicator of a successful marriage gives people unrealistic expectations of themselves and their partners. And that, Savage says, destroys more families than it saves.

Savage, who is 46, has been writing Savage Love since 1991 for The Stranger, an alternative weekly paper in Seattle that syndicates it to more than 50 other newspapers. Savage's sex advice puts me in mind of a smart, tough old grandmother, randy yet stern. It's Dr. Ruth if she were interested in bondage and threesomes. And if she were Catholic: Savage was raised in ethnic-Irish Chicago, one of four children of a cop and a homemaker. He did some time in Catholic school, and his writing bears traces of the church's stark moral clarity, most notable in his impatience with postmodern or queer theorizing or anything that might overturn the centrality of the stable nuclear family.

Savage is not a churchgoer, but he is a cultural Catholic. Listeners to “This American Life,” which since 1996 has aired his homely monologues about his family, might recognize the kinship of those personal stories to the Catholic homilies Savage heard every Sunday of his childhood. Less a scriptural exegesis, like what you get in many a Protestant church, the priest’s homily is often short and framed as a fable or lesson: it’s an easily digested moral tale. You can hear that practiced didacticism in his radio segments about DJ, the son that he and Terry Miller, his husband, adopted as an infant, and you can hear it in the moving piece he read about his mother, who, on her deathbed, said she loved Terry “like a daughter.”

And you can hear it in the It Gets Better project, Savage’s great contribution to family values. Last September, in response to the reported suicides of several young men bullied for being, or seeming, gay, Savage prevailed on the very private Miller, whom he married in 2005 in Vancouver, to make a video about how their lives got better after high school. In the video, they talk into the camera about their courtship, becoming parents and how wonderfully accepting their families have been. “We have really great lives together,” Miller says at the end. Savage adds, “And you can have a great life, too.” Savage posted the video on Sept. 21. Within two months, there were 10,000 videos from people attesting to their own it-gets-better experience, viewed a collective 35 million times. The “It Gets Better” book, a selection of narratives, made The Times’s nonfiction best-seller list. In May, the It Gets Better campaign was featured in an advertisement for Google’s Chrome Web browser.

It Gets Better is, in the end, a paean to stable families: it is a promise to gay youth that if they can just survive the bullying, they can have spouses and children when they grow up. With Savage, the goal is always the possibility of stable, adult families, for gays and straights alike. He is capable of pro-family rants that, stripped of his habitual profanity, would be indistinguishable from Christian-right fund-raising letters.

How, then, can Savage be a monogamy skeptic? When Savage first began writing Savage Love, it was a jokey column, one in which he aimed “to treat straight sex with the same revulsion that straight advice columnists had always had for gay sex,” as Savage told me, when we met in Seattle in April. But he quickly realized that his correspondents were turning to him to save their love lives, not their sex lives.

Today, Savage Love is less a sex column than a relationship column, one point of which is to help good unions last. Sexual fulfillment matters in its own right, but mainly it matters because without it, families are more likely to break apart. It is for the sake of staying together — not merely for the sake of orgasms — that Savage coined his famous acronym, “G.G.G.”: lovers ought to be good, giving and game (put another way, skilled, generous and up for anything). And if they cannot fulfill all of each other’s desires, then it may be advisable to decide to go outside the bounds of marriage if that is what it takes to make the marriage work.

Savage’s position on monogamy is frequently caricatured. He does not believe in promiscuity; indeed, his attacks on the anonymous-sex, gay-bathroom culture were once taken as proof of a secret conservative agenda. And he does not believe that monogamy is wrong for all couples or even for most couples. Rather, he says that a more realistic sexual ethic would prize honesty, a little flexibility and, when necessary, forgiveness over absolute monogamy. And he believes nostalgically, like any good conservative, that we might look to the past for some clues.

“The mistake that straight people made,” Savage told me, “was imposing the monogamous expectation on men. Men were never expected to be monogamous. Men had concubines, mistresses and access to prostitutes, until everybody decided marriage had to be egalitarian and fairsey.” In the feminist revolution, rather than extending to women “the same latitude and license and pressure-release valve that men had always enjoyed,” we extended to men the confines women had always endured. “And it’s been a disaster for marriage.”

In their own marriage, Savage and Miller practice being what he calls “monogamish,” allowing occasional infidelities, which they are honest about. Miller was initially opposed to the idea. “You assume as a younger person that all relationships are monogamous and between two people, that love means nothing can come between you,” said Miller, who met Savage at a club in 1995, when he was 23 and Savage was 30. “Dan has taught me to be more realistic about that kind of stuff.

“It was four or five years before it came up,” Miller said. “It’s not about having three-ways with somebody or having an open relationship. It is just sort of like, Dan has always said if you have different tastes, you have to be good, giving and game, and if you are not G.G.G. for those tastes, then you have to give your partner the out. It took me a while to get down with that.” When I asked Savage how many extramarital encounters there have been, he laughed shyly. “Double digits?” I asked. He said he wasn’t sure; later he and Miller counted, and he reported back that the number was nine. “And far from it being a destabilizing force in our relationship, it’s been a stabilizing force. It may be why we’re still together.”

While his marriage opened up gradually, Savage says that “there’s not a one-size-fits-all way” to approach nonmonogamy, especially if both partners committed to monogamy at the start. “Folks on the verge of making those monogamous

commitments,” Savage told me in one of our many e-mail exchanges, “need to look at the wreckage around them — all those failed monogamous relationships out there (Schwarzenegger, Clinton, Vitter, whoever’s on the cover of US magazine this week) — and have a conversation about what it’ll mean if one or the other partner should cheat. And agree, at the very least, to getting through it, to place a higher value on the relationship itself than on one component of it, sexual exclusivity.”

Not that heeding our desires always simplifies matters. One recent writer to Savage Love thought he would enjoy seeing his wife fool around with another man, and initially did: “Almost every kinky kind was being had and enjoyed.” But when his wife had vaginal intercourse with the other man, something happened. “It was as if all the air in the room was sucked out through my soul,” he writes. Savage’s reply is pragmatic: “If there’s a sex act — say, vaginal intercourse — that holds huge symbolic importance for you or your partner, it might be best to take that act off the menu.” The answer, to Savage’s way of thinking, is smarter boundaries, not hard-line rules about monogamy.

For most people, sex cannot be so transactional; it is bound up with emotional need — to feel we excite our partner above all others, to believe that we have primacy in their lives. The question is whether it’s possible to act on our desires sensibly, as Savage would have it, while maintaining the special equilibrium we trust our marriages, or long-term partnerships, to preserve. Do we know our relationships well enough to go outside them?

There have always been nonmonogamous marriages. In 2001, The Journal of Family Psychology summarized earlier research, finding that “infidelity occurs in a reliable minority of American marriages.” Estimates that “between 20 and 25 percent of all Americans will have sex with someone other than their spouse while they are married” are conservative, the authors wrote. In 2010, NORC, a research center at the University of Chicago, found that, among those who had ever been married, 14 percent of women and 20 percent of men admitted to affairs.

There is no agreement over how honestly we should discuss this reality with our own spouses. Some are nostalgic for the old hypocrisy, the code of silence, the mistresses and concubines men kept discreetly on the side. Clergy members may practice a kind of selective muteness: in their premarital counseling, they often do not stress the possibility of future affairs — but once an affair occurs, they vocally urge couples to tough it out. But what if they were to say, ahead of time: “You two love each other, and you promise you won’t stray, but you might. People do. And if you do, I hope you won’t think it’s the end of the world.” Such straight talk about the difficulty of monogamy, Savage argues, is simply good sense. People who are eager to cheat need to be honest with their partners, but people who think they would never cheat need honesty even more. “The point,” he wrote on his blog last year, “is that people — particularly those who value monogamy — need to understand why being monogamous is so much harder than they’ve been led to believe.”

How exactly does Savage think talking about monogamy’s trials make practicing it easier? In part, by reminding people to be good, giving and game. Straight talk about why we might cheat helps couples figure out ways to keep each other satisfied at home. If I promise my wife that I would never, ever, ever sleep with another woman, the conversation might end there, the two of us gazing into each other’s eyes (even if our minds might be wandering). But if I say, “I’ve been feeling sexually unfulfilled lately because I have a secret fantasy about trading dirty pictures with a woman” — well, then maybe my wife will e-mail me some of her. And so monogamy is preserved.

“If you are expected to be monogamous and have one person be all things sexually for you, then you have to be whores for each other,” Savage says. “You have to be up for anything.”

Savage’s straight-talk approach has an intuitive appeal: our culture places a huge premium on honesty, or at least on confessional, therapeutic, Oprah-fied admissions. We are told to say what is on our minds, so why not extend that principle to sex? Why not tell your spouse everything you want, even if that includes wanting another person? My sense is that this kind of radical honesty may work best for couples who already have strong marriages. Where there is love and equality and no history of betrayal, one partner asking if she can have a fling may not be so risky. Her partner either says yes, and it happens, you hope, with only the best consequences; or the partner says no, in which case their relationship endures, maybe with a little disappointment on one side, a little suspicion on the other.

That is the ideal situation. What if the revelation that a partner is thinking about others creates a shift, one that plagues the marriage? Words have consequences, and most couples, knowing that jealousy is real and can beset any of us, opt for a tacit code of reticence. Not just about sex but about all sorts of things: there are couples who can express opinions about each other’s clothing choices or cooking or taste in movies, and there are couples who cannot. I don’t mind if my wife tells me another man is hot, but it took me a long time to accept her criticism of my writing. We all have many sensitive spots, but one of the most universal is the fear of not being everything to your partner — the fear, in other words, that she might find somebody worthier. It is the fear of being alone.

Where a relationship is troubled, and one partner senses, correctly, that aloneness is an imminent threat, then the other partner asking for permission to have a fling is no neutral act. If you are scared of losing your partner, you may say yes to anything she asks, including permission for an affair that will wound you deeply. “The problem is that with many of these couples, one partner wants it, and the other says yes because she’s afraid that he will leave her,” says Janis Abrahms Spring, a psychologist and couples’ therapist whose book, “After the Affair,” is about couples badly damaged by infidelity.

Spring is inclined to a pessimism as strong as Savage’s optimism — after all, she works with couples who have ended up in counseling — but she offers a persuasive reminder that there may be no such thing as total honesty. Even when we think we are enthusiastically assenting to a partner’s request, we may not know ourselves as well as we think we do. This is true not just for monogamy but also for sexual acts within marriage. Some of Savage’s toughest critics are feminists who think he can be a bit too glib with his injunction to please our partners.

“Sometimes he can shame women for not being into things that their male partners are into, if they have male partners,” Sady Doyle, a feminist blogger, told me. “The whole good-giving-and-game thing is something I actually agree with. I don’t think you should flip out on your partner if they share something sexual with you. But I think sometimes it’s much harder for women to say, ‘I’m not into that,’ or ‘Please, I don’t want to do that, let’s do something else,’ than it is to say, ‘Sure.’ Putting all the onus on the person who doesn’t have that fetish or desire, particularly if the person who doesn’t have that desire is the woman, really reproduces a lot of old structures and means of oppression for women.”

Spring and Doyle both hint at a larger truth about men and women, which is that, generally speaking, they view sex differently. While there are plenty of women who can separate sex from love, can be happily promiscuous or could have a meaningless, one-time fling, there are — let’s face it — more men like that. The world of Savage Love will always appeal more to men, even men who truly love their partners. Cheating men are often telling the truth when they say, “She meant nothing to me.” It really was just sex. And Savage tells us that, with proper disclosure and consent, just sex can be O.K.

But for many women, and not a few men, there is no such thing as “just sex,” for their partners or for themselves. What if a woman, or a man for that matter, looks outside marriage for the other emotional satisfactions that come along with sex? Savage has less to offer that person. He does not tell people to take long-term boyfriends or girlfriends. He is skeptical that group marriages, of three or more partners, can last very long. Nor could he have much to offer the person who feels a partner ought to constrain his urges. There is a reason that sex advice is easier to give than relationship advice. Satisfying a sexual yearning is easier than satisfying a hole in your life.

In an e-mail he sent me, Savage countered that “there are plenty of women out there who have affairs just for the sex.” But he agreed that there is something male about his perspective. “Well, I’m male,” he wrote. “And women, straight women, are in relationships with men. Doesn’t it help to know what we’re really like? Women can go on marrying and pretending that their boyfriends and husbands are Mr. Darcy or some RomCom dream man. But where’s that going to get ’em? Besides divorce court?”

Savage’s honesty ethic gives couples permission to find happiness in unusual places; he believes that pretty much anything can be used to spice up a marriage, although he excludes feces, pets and incest, as well as minors, the nonconsenting, the duped and the dead. In “The Commitment,” Savage’s book about his and Miller’s decision to marry, he describes how a college student approached him after a campus talk and said, as Savage tells it, that “he got off on having birthday cakes smashed in his face.” But no one had ever obliged him. “My heart broke when he told me that the one and only time he told a girlfriend about his fetish, she promptly dumped him. Since then he had been too afraid to tell anyone else.” Savage took the young man up to his hotel room and smashed a cake in his face.

The point is: priests and rabbis don’t tell couples they might need to involve cake play in their marriages; moms and dads don’t; even best friends can be shy about saying what they like. Savage wants to make sure that no strong marriage ever fails because an ashamed husband or wife is desperately seeking cake play — or bondage, urine play or any of the other unspeakable activities that Savage has helped make speakable. If cake play is what a man needs, his G.G.G. wife should give it to him; if she can’t bring herself to, then maybe she should allow him a chocolate-frosted excursion with another woman. But for God’s sake, keep it together for the kids.

If you believe Savage, there is strong precedent, in other times and in other cultures, for nonmonogamous relationships that endure. In fact, there has recently been a good deal of scholarship proving that point, including Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá’s “Sex at Dawn,” one of Savage’s favorite books, and Stephanie Coontz’s definitive “Marriage, a History.” Like Savage, Coontz says she believes that “people often end up exploding a relationship that was working well because one partner strays or has an affair that doesn’t mean anything.”

But, she says, we are to some extent trapped in our culture. It is one thing for the Inuit men to have “temporary wives,” whom they take along on trips when they leave their other wives at home, and for pregnant Bari women, in Venezuela, to have sex with multiple men, all of whom are considered responsible for the eventual child. Their societies have very different ideas about marriage. “I think you can combine a high tolerance of flings with a de-emphasis on jealousy in long-term relationships,” Coontz said, “but usually that is only in societies where friendships and kin relationships are as emotionally salient as romantic partnerships.”

In the 18th century, according to Coontz, American men could mention their mistresses in letters to their wives’ brothers; they could mention contracting syphilis from a prostitute. Men understood the masculine prerogative, and they countenanced it, even at the expense of their own sisters. “That would be unthinkable today,” Coontz said. “For thousands of years it was expected of men they would have affairs and flings, but not on the terms of honesty and equality Dan envisions. I can certainly see the appeal of suggesting we try and make this an open, mutual, gender-equal arrangement. I’m a little dubious how much that is going to work.”

It was not until the 20th century that Americans evolved an understanding of marriage in which partners must meet all of each other’s needs: sexual, emotional, material. When we rely on our partners for everything, any hint of betrayal is terrifying. “That is the bind we are in,” Coontz said. “We accord so much priority to the couple relationship. It is tough under those conditions for most people to live with the insecurity of giving their partners permission to have flings.”

There is one subculture in America that practices nonmonogamy and equality between partners: the sizable group of gay men in open, or semiopen, long-term partnerships. (A study published in 2010 found 50 percent of gay male couples in the Bay Area had sexual relationships outside their union, with their partner’s knowledge and approval.) But it is unclear if gay habits, which Savage thinks can be a model, will survive the advent of gay equality. Historically, gay men have treated monogamy more casually, in part because society treated gay coupledness as unthinkable. Now, however, gay men are marrying or entering into socially sanctioned partnerships. As they are absorbed into the mainstream of connubial bliss, they may lose the strong friendship networks that gay men once substituted for nuclear families — friendship networks that, according to Coontz, can make infidelity less threatening. In other words, as they take out joint mortgages and pal around with straight parents from the PTA, they may become considerably more square about fidelity. Living in their McMansions, they, too, may decide that the walls of their marriages must be guarded at all costs.

Judith Stacey, a New York University sociologist who researched gay men’s romantic arrangements for her book “Unhitched,” argues that gay men, in general, will continue to require less monogamy. “They are men,” she said, and she believes it is easier for them — right down to the physiology of orgasm — to separate physical and emotional intimacy. Lesbians and straight women tend to be far less comfortable with nonmonogamy than gay men. But what matters is that neither monogamy nor [polygamy](#) is humankind’s sole natural state. “One size never fits all, and it isn’t just dividing between men and women and gay and straight,” she said. “Monogamy is not natural, nonmonogamy is not natural. Variation is what’s natural.”

I asked Stacey if, given the differences between men and women, she thought Savage’s vision was unrealistic for straight couples. Yes and no, she said: “I believe monogamy is actually crucial for some couples and totally irrelevant for others.” That does not mean that nonmonogamous couples are free to do as they please. Creating nonmonogamy that strengthens rather than corrodes a marriage is surely as much work as monogamy. Couples should make vows and honor them. Not all good relationships require monogamy, but they all require what she calls integrity.

“What integrity means for me is we shouldn’t impose a single vow of monogamy as a superior standard for all relationships,” Stacey said. “Intimate partners should decide the vows you want to make. Work out terms of what your commitments are, and be on same page. There are women perfectly happy to have agreements in which when you are out of town you can have a little fling on the side. And rules range from ‘[don’t ask, don’t tell](#)’ to ‘I want to know’ to ‘bring it home and talk about it and excite our relationship.’”

Stacey and Savage each say that monogamy is the right choice for many couples; they are exalting options, not any particular option. As a straight, monogamous, married male, I happen to think this is a good thing: if there are people whose marriages work best with more flexibility, they should find the courage to choose an arrangement that works for them, society be damned. I also recognize, however, that we may choose marriage in part to escape the terror of choice. There are so many reasons to marry; we could call them all “love,” but let’s be more specific: admiring how she looks in a sundress, trusting her to improve your first drafts, knowing that when the time comes she will make the best mother ever. But another reason might be that life before her was so confusing. In all those other relationships, it was never clear when there was an exclusive commitment or who would use the L-word first or when a Saturday-night date could be assumed.

Marrying has the virtue of clearing all that up: exclusive, you both use the L-word, Saturday night assumed. Simple, right?

Not long ago, I mentioned Savage to a psychotherapist who works with children. He said that the It Gets Better project had saved the lives of several of his patients. “They tell me they might have killed themselves if it weren’t for Dan Savage,” my friend said, as tears filled his eyes.

Hearing such reactions, and having been personally subjected by Savage to his earnest, ardent effusions about his wonderful husband and awesome son, it is tough to credit anyone who thinks Savage is a subversive figure. When I think of Savage, I think of his response to the mother whose ex-husband, her son’s father, was undergoing a sex change. Her son was angry, and she wondered what she should say to him. Savage said the boy was entitled to his feelings. “Children have a right to some stability and constancy from the adults in their lives,” Savage wrote. “Perhaps I’m a transphobic bigot,” but asking a father to wait “a measly 36 months” before having his penis chopped off “is a sacrifice any father should be willing to make for his 15-year-old son. Call me old-fashioned.”

Savage is old-fashioned, as bitterly hilarious as that might sound to gay-marriage opponents. After the news of the Arnold Schwarzenegger love child broke, I received an e-mail from Savage in which he expressed concern about the article I was writing. As I would expect, he framed his position in terms of respect for the family.

“I’m afraid,” he wrote, “it’s going to become: ‘This Savage person is crazy. Just look at what nonmonogamy did for Arnold! Look at the chaos that being nonmonogamous creates! Failed marriages, devastated children, scandal!’ But Arnold wasn’t in a nonmonogamous relationship. He was in a monogamous relationship. He failed at monogamy; he didn’t succeed at nonmonogamy.”

Savage does not believe people should live in toxic, miserable marriages. The Schwarzenegger family is surely beyond repair. But they are an extreme case: not all adultery produces secret families. Most of it is minor by comparison, and Savage believes that adultery can be one of those trials, like financial woes or ill health, that marriages can be expected to survive.

“Given the rates of infidelity, people who get married should have to swear a blood oath that if it’s violated, as traumatic as that would be, the greater good is the relationship,” Savage told me. “The greater good is the home created for children. If there are children present, they’ll get past it. The cultural expectation should be if there’s infidelity, the marriage is more important than fidelity.”

It gets better? It does. But it also gets very complicated. Savage is not arguing “let Arnold be Arnold.” He is imploring us to know the people we marry and to know ourselves and to plan accordingly. He believes that our actions mark us as a compassionate people, that in truth we are always ready to forgive an adulterer, except the one we are married to. He points out that the Louisiana senator, and prominent john, David Vitter — “who I hate,” he reassures me — is still in office, and that “Bill Clinton is a beloved elder statesman, and Eliot Spitzer is back on television.” We are already a nation of forgivers, even when it comes to marriage. Dan Savage thinks we should take some pride in that.

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