

CHAPTER 2. VALUES AND ETHICS

VALUES: DENIAL VS. FULFILLMENT

Dossie's bachelor's thesis was entitled "Sex Is Nice And Pleasure Is Good For You." That idea is as radical now, in the '90s, as it was back in the '70s when Dossie first wrote it.

Our culture positively worships self-denial — those who unapologetically satisfy their desires, whether they be for food, recreation or sex, are vilified as immature, disgusting, even sinful. While we'll leave it to other authors to speak against anorexia and workaholism, we can certainly say that we see the path of sex-negativism and living in sexual deprivation as a harmful one. Self-loathing, hatred of one's own body and sexuality, fear and guilt over one's own sexual urges are the outcome.

We see ourselves surrounded by the "walking wounded" — by people who have been deeply, if not irrevocably, injured by fear, shame and hatred of their own sexual selves. We believe that happy connected sex is the cure for these wounds, that it is important, possibly even essential, to most people's sense of self-worth, to their belief that life is good. We have never met anyone who had low self-esteem at the moment of orgasm.

DOES SEX NEED A "REASON"?

If you walk up to a randomly selected individual and propose that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you, you will probably hear a lot of

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spluttering, argument and “yahbuts” – AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, rape, the Madison Avenue commercialization of sexual desire, and so on. None of which change the core idea.

There is nothing in the world so terrific that it can't be abused if you're determined to do so: familial connections can be violated, sexual desire can be manipulated. Even chocolate can be abused. That doesn't change the basic wonderfulness of any of these things: the danger lies in the motivation of the abuser, not the nature of the item.

Sex gets a bad rap from our anhedonic culture, whose Puritan roots have led to a deep distrust of pleasure for its own sake. That distrust often expresses itself in concerns like those expressed by our mythical person on the street above. If there were no such thing as sexually transmitted disease, if nobody got pregnant unless they wanted to, if all sex were consensual and pleasurable, how would the world feel about it then? How would *you* feel?

If you look deep inside yourself, we bet you can find bits and pieces of sex-negativism, often hiding behind judgmental words like “promiscuous,” “hedonistic,” “decadent” and “nonproductive.” (The two of us are about as slutty as you can get, and *we're* certainly not immune to this sort of cultural programming.)

Even people who consider themselves sex-positive and sexually liberated often fall into a different trap – the trap of rationalizing sex. Releasing physical tension, relieving menstrual symptoms, maintaining mental health, preventing prostate problems, making babies, cementing relationships and so on are all admirable goals, and wonderful side benefits of sex. But they are not what sex is *for*. Sex is for pleasure, a complete and worthwhile goal in and of itself. People have sex because

it feels very good, and then they feel good about themselves. The worthiness of pleasure is one of the core values of ethical sluthood.

ETHICS

We are ethical people, ethical sluts. It is very important to us to treat people well and not hurt anyone. Our ethics come from our own sense of rightness, and from the empathy and love we hold for those around us. It is not okay with us to hurt another person because then we hurt too, and we don't feel good about ourselves.

Ethical slutdom is a challenging path: we don't have a poly-amorous Miss Manners telling us how to do our thing courteously and respectfully, so we have to make it up as we go along. However, we're sure you've figured out by now that to us, being a slut doesn't mean simply doing whatever you want, whenever you want, with whomever you want.

So in this slightly disorienting world of sluthood, in which everything your mom, your minister, your spouse and your television ever told you is probably wrong, how do you find your ethical center?

Most of our criteria for ethics are quite pragmatic. Is anyone being harmed? Is there any way to avoid causing that harm? Are there any risks? Is everybody involved aware of those risks and doing what can be done to minimize them?

And, on the positive side: How much fun is it? What is everybody learning from it? Is it helping someone to grow? Is it helping make the world a better place?

First and foremost, ethical sluts value *consent*. When we use this word – and we will, often, throughout this book – we mean “an

active collaboration for the benefit, well-being and pleasure of all persons concerned." If someone is being coerced, bullied, blackmailed, manipulated, lied to or ignored, what is happening is not consensual. And sex which is not consensual is not ethical – period.

Ethical sluts are *honest* – with ourselves and others. We take time with ourselves, to figure out our own emotions and motivations, and to untangle them for greater clarity when necessary. Then we openly share that information with those who need it. We do our best not to let our fears and bashfulness be an obstacle to our honesty – we trust that our partners will go on respecting and loving us, warts and all.

Ethical sluts also *recognize the ramifications* of our sexual choices. We see that our emotions, our upbringing and the standards of our culture often conflict with our sexual desires. And we make a conscious commitment to supporting ourselves and our partners as we deal with those conflicts, honestly and honorably.

We do not allow our sexual choices to have an unnecessary impact on those who have not consented to participate. We are *respectful* of others' feelings, and when we aren't sure how someone feels, we ask.

Ethical sluts recognize the difference between things they can and should control, and things they can't. While we sometimes may feel jealous or territorial, we *own those feelings* – doing our best not to blame or control, but asking for the support we need to help ourselves feel safe and cared for.

All of this can be hard, but your authors are here to help. We wrote this book to help you become an ethical slut.

Sex and Relationships

Our monogamy-centrist culture tends to assume that the purpose and ultimate goal of all relationships – and, for that matter, all sex – is lifetime pair-bonding, and that any relationship which falls short of that goal has failed. We disagree.

We think sexual pleasure can certainly contribute to love, commitment, and long-term stability, if that's what you want. But those are hardly the only good reasons for having sex. We believe in valuing relationships for what makes them valuable, a seeming tautology which is wiser than it sounds.

A relationship may be valuable simply because it affords sexual pleasure to those involved; there is nothing wrong with sex for sex's sake. Or it might involve sex as a pathway to other lovely things – intimacy, connection, companionship, even romantic love – which in no way obviates the basic goodness of the pleasurable sex.

A sexual relationship may last for an hour or two. It's still a relationship; the participants have related to one another, as sex partners, companions and/or lovers, for the duration of their interaction. Longevity is not a good criterion by which to judge the success or failure of a relationship: Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote:

*After all, my erstwhile dear,
My no longer cherished,
Need we say it wasn't love
Just because it perished?!*

One-night stands can be intense, life-enhancing and fulfilling; so can lifetime love affairs. While ethical sluts may choose to have some

kinds of relationships and not others, we believe that all relationships have the potential to teach us, move us, and above all give us pleasure.

Our friend Jaymes says, "I believe that every person you connect with on this planet has some sort of a message to give you. If you cut yourself off from whatever kind of relationship wants to form with that person, you're failing to pick up your messages."

Or, to put it another way, Dossie remembers an interview with a young flower child back in 1967 who made the most succinct statement of ethical sluthood we've ever seen: "We believe it's okay to have sex with anybody you love... and we believe in loving everybody!"

See there? You don't need a lot of "thou shalt nots" to be an ethical person. Honesty, empathy, foresight, integrity, intelligence and respect will do just fine.

CHAPTER 3. PARADIGMS, OLD AND NEW

We're sure you don't need us to tell you that the world does not, for the most part, honor sluthood, or think well of those who are sexually explorative. In this chapter we'll discuss some of the ideas and assumptions that have helped make so many sluts feel bad about themselves. While you read them, you might like think about what all these judgments about sluts tell us about our culture.

"PROMISCUOUS"

This means we enjoy too many sexual partners. This word alone has possibly created more unhappy sluts than any other. (We've also been called "indiscriminate" in our sexuality, which we resent: we can *always* tell our lovers apart.)

We do not believe that there is such a thing as too much sex, except perhaps on certain happy occasions when our options exceed our abilities, nor do we believe that the ethics we are talking about here have anything to do with moderation or abstinence. Kinsey once defined a "nymphomaniac" as "someone who has more sex than you."²

Is having less sex somehow more virtuous than having more? We think not. We measure the ethics of a good slut not by the number of his partners, but by the respect and care with which he treats them.

“AMORAL”

Our culture also tells us that sluts are evil, uncaring, amoral and destructive – Jezebel, Casanova, Don Juan. Watch out! The mythological evil slut is grasping and manipulative, seeking to steal something – virtue, money, self-esteem – from his partners. In some ways, this archetype is based on the idea that sex is a commodity, a coin you trade for something else – stability, children, a wedding ring – and that any other transaction constitutes being cheated and betrayed. (Once when Dossie was recovering from a botched abortion a friendly nurse tried to comfort her by saying, “I know, honey, they all promise to marry you.” Dossie managed to keep a straight face – the nurse was friendly and supportive, and it seemed cruel to inform her that she wouldn’t have dreamed of marrying the unethical slut who by this time was conspicuous only by his cowardly absence.)

We have rarely observed any Jezebels or Casanovas in our community, but perhaps it is not very satisfying for a thief to steal what is freely given. We do not worry about being robbed of our sexual value by the people we share pleasure with.

“SINFUL”

Some people base their sense of ethics on what God, or their church, or their parents, or their culture, considers okay or not okay. They believe that being good consists of obedience to laws set down by a power greater than themselves. Dossie remembers explaining to some family friends that she had left the church she was raised in because she didn’t believe a just God would punish her aunt for getting a (much justified) divorce. The family friends were pretty conservative people, and of an older generation. One of them asked, “Well, if you don’t believe God

will punish you, why don’t you just go around murdering people?” Dossie explained that she doesn’t murder people because her internal sense of ethics, her empathy with others, and her desire to feel good about herself, all tell her that to harm another person would be a terrible thing for her to do.

To believe that God doesn’t like sex is like believing that God doesn’t like you: we all wind up carrying a secret shame for our own perfectly natural sexual desires and fulfillments. We prefer the beliefs of a woman we met who is a devoted churchgoer. She told us that when she was about five years old, she discovered the joys of masturbation in the back seat of the family car, tucked under a warm blanket on a long trip. It felt so wonderful that she concluded that the existence of her clitoris was proof positive that God loved her.

“PATHOLOGICAL”

In the late 19th Century, with the advent of psychological studies of sexual behavior, Krafft-Ebing and Freud attempted to preach more tolerance by theorizing that sluts are not bad, but sick, suffering from psychopathology that is not their fault, since their neurosis derives from having their sexuality warped by their parents during their toilet training. So, theoretically, we should no longer burn sluts at the stake, but send them to mental hospitals to be cured of repression in an atmosphere that permits no sexual expression whatsoever.

During your authors’ childhood and adolescence in the early ‘60s, it was still common practice to certify and incarcerate adolescents for “treatment” of the “illness” of being sexual, especially if they were gay or lesbian, or female and in danger of damaging their market value as virgins. Heterosexual men were virtually never pathologized and

incarcerated to prevent them from being sexual before they were eighteen.

Consider the concept of nymphomania, a disease never attributed to men. It is woman, enjoying sex with no one in control except herself, who is considered dangerous and sick. Dossie notes that in three decades of being a sex radical, she has observed only one incidence of a person driven by such indiscriminate and constant sexual need that it constituted a destructive force in her life, who in Dossie's opinion matched the criteria for nymphomania. But she has clients in her therapy practice who describe themselves as nymphomaniacs if they masturbate every day.

“ADDICTED”

More recently we hear about sex addicts and avoidance of intimacy. Sex addiction is usually defined as the substitution of sex for nourishment of other needs, like to allay anxiety or bolster sagging self-esteem. Such people may have compulsive needs to “score,” to succeed sexually with a large number of partners, or to get validation for their sexual attractiveness over and over, as if they need constant reassurance because at the core they do not see themselves as attractive and lovable.

Sex *can* be misused as a substitute for connection, emotional relationship or a solid sense of internal security based on knowing your own worth. Some sexual abuse survivors become what is called “sexualized” in a childhood where the closest approximation to adult attention, validation and affection they had was molestation. Such survivors may need to expand their options and learn other ways to get their needs met. On the other hand, “sex addict” seems to be the latest incarnation of cultural judgment about sluts: a good friend of Catherine's once told her, quite seriously, that the reason Catherine was so contented

was that she was a sex addict who had managed to find a way to make a lifestyle out of her addiction.

If you are working on any of these issues, we suggest that you put some thought into how you would like your sexuality to be different in the future. Some twelve-step groups and therapists may try to tell you that anything but the most conservative of sexual behaviors is wrong, or unhealthy, or “into your addiction”; we encourage you to trust your own beliefs and find yourself a more supportive environment. If your goal is monogamy, that's fine, and if your goal is to stop seeking sex in the place of friendship, or any other behavior pattern that you wish to rescult, that's fine too. We do not believe that successfully recovering sex addicts have to be monogamous unless they want to be.

“EASY”

Is there, we wonder, some virtue in being difficult?

Myths About Sluts

One of the challenges facing the ethical slut is our culture's insistence that, simply because “everybody knows” something, it must inevitably be true. A lot of these cultural paradigms have become almost invisible; people take them as much for granted as the air they breathe or the ground they walk on. Questioning what “everybody knows” is sometimes difficult and disorienting, but we have found it to be rewarding — questioning is the first step toward creating a *new* paradigm, one that may fit you better.

We urge you to regard with great skepticism any sentence that begins “Everybody knows that...” or “Common sense tells us that...” or “It's common knowledge that....” Often, these phrases are signposts for

cultural belief systems which may be antisexual, monogamy-centrist and/or codependent.

Cultural belief systems can be *very* deeply rooted in literature, law and archetype, which means that shaking them from your own personal ethos can be difficult. But the first step in exploring them is, of course, recognizing them.

Here, then, are some of the pervasive myths that we have heard all our lives, and have come to understand are most often untrue and destructive to our relationships and our lives.

MYTH #1: LONG-TERM MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE ONLY REAL RELATIONSHIPS.

Lifetime monogamy as an ideal is a relatively new concept in human history, and makes us unique among primates. There is nothing that can be achieved within a long-term monogamous relationship that cannot be achieved without one — business partnership, deep romantic attachment, stable parenting, personal growth, and care and companionship during the aging process are all well within the abilities of the slut.

People who believe this myth may feel that something is wrong with them if they aren't in a committed twosome — if they prefer to remain "free agents," if they discover themselves loving more than one person at a time, if they have tried one or more traditional relationships that didn't work out. Instead of questioning the myth, they question themselves. Such people often have a very romantic view of couplehood — that Mr. or Ms. Right will automatically solve all their problems, fill all the gaps, make their lives complete.

One friend of ours points out that if something goes wrong in a monogamous marriage, nobody takes that as evidence against the

practicality of monogamy — but if something goes awry in an open relationship, many folks instantly take that as proof that non-monogamy doesn't work.

A subset of this myth is the belief that if you're really in love, you will automatically lose all interest in others, and thus, if you're having sexual or romantic feelings toward anyone but your partner, you're not really in love. This myth has cost many people a great deal of happiness through the centuries, yet is untrue to the point of absurdity; a ring around the finger does not cause a nerve block to the genitals. Even happily monogamous couples recognize the realities of outside sexual and romantic desire: if Jimmy Carter could lust in his heart, so can you.

MYTH #2: SEXUAL DESIRE IS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE.

This one goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, and leads to a lot of crazy-making double standards. In this worldview, men are hopelessly sexually voracious and predatory, and women are supposed to control and civilize them by being pure, asexual and withholding. Thus the openly sexual woman destroys civilization.

Many people also believe that unashamed sexual desire, particularly desire for many people, destroys the family — yet we suspect that far more families have been destroyed by bitter divorces over adultery than have ever been disturbed by ethical consensual nonmonogamy.

MYTH #3: LOVING SOMEONE MAKES IT OK TO CONTROL HIS BEHAVIOR.

This kind of territorial reasoning is designed, we guess, to make people feel secure — but we don't believe that anybody has the right, much less the obligation, to control the behavior of another functioning adult. Being treated according to this myth doesn't make us feel secure, it makes us feel furious. The old "awwww, she's jealous — she must really

care about me" reasoning, or the scene in which the girl falls in love with the boy when he punches out a rival suitor, are symptomatic of a very disturbed set of personal boundaries which can lead to a great deal of unhappiness.

This myth also leads to the belief, so often promulgated in Hollywood films and popular literature, that fucking someone else is something you do *to* your partner, not *for* yourself — and is, moreover, the very worst thing you can do to someone. (For many years, adultery was the only legally acceptable grounds for divorce, leaving those who had unfortunately married batterers or drunks in a very difficult position.) People who believe this often believe that nonmonogamy must be nonconsensual, in order to protect the sensibilities of the "betrayed" partner.

MYTH #4. JEALOUSY IS INEVITABLE AND IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERCOME.

Jealousy is, without a doubt, a very common experience in our culture — so much so that a person who doesn't experience jealousy is looked at as a bit odd, or in denial. But the fact is that a situation which would cause intense jealousy for one person can be no big deal for another. Some people get jealous when their honey takes a sip out of someone else's Coke, others happily watch their beloved wave bye-bye for a month of amorous sporting with a friend at the far end of the country. Jealousy is common, but far from inevitable.

Some people also believe that jealousy is such a shattering emotion that they have no choice but to succumb to it. On the contrary, we have found that jealousy is an emotion like any other: it feels bad (sometimes *very* bad), but it is not intolerable; sometimes the best thing to do with jealousy is simply to allow yourself to feel it. We have also found that many of the thinking patterns which lead to jealousy can be

unlearned, and that unlearning them is often a useful process. Later in this book, we will discuss jealousy in much greater detail.

MYTH #5: OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENTS REDUCE INTIMACY IN THE PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP AND IMPEDE PROBLEM-SOLVING.

Most marriage counselors are taught that when a member of an otherwise happily married couple has an "affair," this must be a symptom of unresolved conflict or unfulfilled needs that should be dealt with in the primary relationship. Sometimes this is true, and equally often it is not. The problem is that this myth leaves no room for the possibility of growthful and constructive open sexual lifestyles. It is cruel and insensitive to interpret an affair as a symptom of sickness in the relationship, as it leaves the "cheated-on" partner — who may already be feeling insecure — to wonder what is wrong with him. Meanwhile, the "cheating" partner gets told that she is only "acting out" to get back at her primary partner, and she really doesn't want, need or even like her lover.

Many people have sex outside their primary relationships for reasons that have nothing to do with any inadequacy in their partner or in the relationship. Perhaps this outside relationship allows a particular kind of intimacy that the primary partner doesn't even want, such as fetish behavior or particular sexual activities, and thus constitutes a resolution of an otherwise insoluble conflict. Or perhaps it meets other needs — such as a need for uncomplicated physical sex without the trappings of relationship, or for sex with someone of a gender other than one's partner's, or for sex at a time when it is otherwise not available (during travel or a partner's illness, for example). Or it may simply be a natural extension of an emotional and/or physical attraction to someone besides the primary partner.

An outside involvement does not in any way have to subtract from the intimacy you share with your partner unless you let it. And we sincerely hope you won't.

MYTH #6: "SWEEP AWAY BY LOVE."

Hollywood tells us that "love means never having to say you're sorry," and we, fools that we are, believe it. This myth has it that if you're really in love with someone, you never have to argue, disagree, communicate, negotiate or do any other kind of work. It also tells us that love means we automatically get turned on by our beloved, and that we never have to do anything to deliberately kindle passion. Those who believe this myth may find themselves feeling that their love has failed every time they need to schedule a discussion or to have a courteous (or not-so-courteous) disagreement. They may also believe that any sexual behavior that doesn't fit their criteria for "normal" sex — from fantasies to vibrators — is "artificial," and indicates that something is lacking in the quality of their love.

What We Believe

So we just spent a whole section telling you about all the concepts and mythologies the world may believe about sluts. Now, we'll tell you our side of the story — the way we look at our lives and the lives of the people we know.

YOU ARE ALREADY WHOLE

Jane Austen wrote, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."³ While we think Jane probably had her tongue firmly planted in her cheek, a great many people do believe that to be single is to be somehow

incomplete, and that they need to find their "other half." A lot of the myths we mentioned in the previous section are based in that belief.

We believe, on the other hand, that the fundamental sexual unit is one person; adding more people to that unit may be intimate, fun and companionable but does not complete anybody. The only thing in this world that you can control is yourself — your own reactions, desires and behaviors. Thus, a fundamental step in ethical sluthood is to bring your locus of control into yourself — to recognize the difference between your "stuff" and other people's. When you do this, you become able to complete yourself. That's why we call this "integrity."

You may notice that the parts of this book are based in that idea: in Part I, we talk about the ideas and concepts you need to grasp within yourself; in Part II, we talk about interactions with other sluts; and in Part III, we discuss interactions with the world. (In Part IV, we cover the fun stuff that didn't fit in anywhere else.) Similarly, throughout the book, every time we introduce a new idea or concept, we will start by discussing how it works for the individual — you need to understand these concepts, and how they apply to you, before you can begin communicating your needs and ideas to the other people in your life. When you have built a satisfying relationship with yourself, then you have something of great worth to share with others.

STARVATION ECONOMIES

Many people believe, explicitly or implicitly, that romantic love, intimacy and connection are finite capabilities of which there is never enough to go around, and that if you give some to one person, you must be taking some away from another.

We call this belief a “starvation economy”; we’ll talk much more about it in Part II. Many of us learn to think this way in childhood, from parents who have little intimacy or attention for us, so we learn that there is only a limited amount of love in the world and we have to fight for whatever we get — often in cutthroat competition with our brothers and sisters.

People who operate from starvation economies can become very possessive about the people, things and ideas that matter to them. They are working from a paradigm that anything they get comes from a small pool of not-enough, and must thus be taken from someone else — and, similarly, that anything anyone else gets must be taken from them.

It is important to distinguish between starvation economies and real-world limits. Time, for example, is a real-world limit; even the most dedicated slut has only twenty-four hours every day. Love is not a real-world limit: the mother of nine children can love each of them as much as the mother of an only child.

Our belief is that the human capacity for sex and love and intimacy is far greater than most people think — possibly infinite — and that having a lot of satisfying connections simply makes it possible for you to have a lot more. Imagine what it would feel like to live in an abundance of sex and love, to feel that you had all of both that you could possibly want, free of any feelings of deprivation or neediness. Imagine how strong you would feel if you got to exercise your “love muscles” that much, and how much love you would have to give!

OPENNESS CAN BE THE SOLUTION, NOT THE PROBLEM

Is sexual adventurousness simply a way to avoid intimacy? Not usually, in our experience.

While it is certainly possible to use your outside relationships in order to avoid problems or intimacy in your primary relationship, we do not agree that this pattern is inevitable or even common. Many people, in fact, find that their outside relationships can *increase* their intimacy with their primary partner by reducing the pressures on that relationship, and by giving them a safe place to express issues that may have them feeling “stuck” in the primary relationship.

These are our beliefs. You get to have beliefs of your own. What matters to us is not that you agree with us, but that you question the prevailing paradigm and decide for yourself what you believe. Thousands and thousands of ethical sluts are proving every day that the old “everybody knows” myths don’t *have* to be true.

We encourage you to explore your own realities and create your own ethos — one that spurs you onward in your evolution, that supports you as you grow, and that reflects your pride and happiness in your newfound relationships.