

Being single is a viable choice

by Terje Anderson

One of the major joys of being a gay man is, for me, the freedom to explore and define new ways of loving, unfettered by social conventions and expectations. Freed from the model of the nuclear family, freed from the demand to marry, reproduce and settle down into a conformist life, we face the unexplored territory of structuring our relationships and our lives without rules and, frequently, without models.

That freedom, that trip into uncharted waters, is exhilarating and challenging. Coming out is only the first of a long series of steps in the liberating business of defining ourselves as "gay." Faced with seemingly endless possibilities, gay men and lesbians are given something which is all too frequently denied people in our society: choices.

That is why, when a recent "Out in the Mountains" staff meeting discussed the possibility of developing a "couple of the month" feature, I was less than comfortable.

Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against lesbian and gay couples. In a heterosexual world, where same sex couples receive little of the support (both emotional and material) which our society gives to married heterosexuals, maintaining a relationship is both a challenge and a testament to the power of lesbian and gay love.

What does bother me is a tendency to hold coupling up as an ideal to which we should all aspire or, worse yet, as proof to the heterosexual world that we are just as "normal" as they are. Our dignity as gay men and lesbians comes from our individual strengths and weaknesses, not our desire to attach ourselves to another or our ability to mimic straight society's institutions.

The couple feature may or may not materialize (I hope it does), but we need to affirm and support the full range of lesbian and gay lifestyles and choices (at least those which are non-coercive and non-damaging).

I can hear voices out there now saying "Sounds like just some sour grapes from someone who can't find a lover." The fact is that I am single by choice, and intend to remain that way. I've been in several serious relationships, and the lesson I've learned repeatedly is that I am happier outside of them.

My last relationship, which ended over two years ago, lasted through three years, two countries and three cities. It contained many moments of great joy, many of great pain, and taught me an incredible amount about myself and how I feel being part of a couple.

What made the most lasting impression on me was how much individuality I lost to the relationship. From the outside, friends (gay and

straight) treated us as though we were joined at the hip permanently. Invitations were never extended individually, but only to us both. "TerjeandMichael" became a single word, not the names of two separate and distinct individuals. The thought that we could enjoy different things, have different interests, and at times go separate ways seemed lost on even those friends we tried to convince of the fact.

That loss of individuality became acute as we began to get to know each other's friends. All too often, I was known as "Michael's lover," devoid of any identifying marks other than our relationship. He experienced the same phenomenon with many of my friends. It began to grow dangerously close to the possessive nature of "man and wife," denying the equal relationship we were trying so hard to build.

But not all of the loss of individuality can be blamed on our friends. Frequently, I found myself giving up things which were dear to me for the sake of the relationship. In the process, I became not the person that Michael had fallen in love with, but rather a homogenized version of my old self. We both, and our relationship, suffered from the transformation.

There is a fine line between the compromises one makes to live with another person (as a lover or roommate) and giving up important pieces of one's identity. While I might be able to adjust to changes in sleeping habits (night people vs. day people), eating patterns, and the choice of movies, the demands couples tacitly make upon each other usually go beyond such superficial things.

My time and my energy were no longer my own, but rather a joint possession. Yet, for example, going to political meetings is not just a hobby for me, politics is an inherent part of my self-identity. Likewise, being asked to sacrifice late night coffee with friends, Saturdays spent exploring ethnic neighborhoods, or hours browsing in bookstores became much more than just a set of compromises and adjustments, it started to infringe upon my my nature. (Michael doubtless has a similar list of his own.)

Maintaining the relationship became an end in itself. It wasn't even as if I was making concessions for another person whom I loved, we were both offering vital pieces of ourselves for the sake of a third entity, for the relationship. The relationship itself, not the things which emerged from it, not the love we gave each other, became of paramount importance.

Our friends seemed co-conspirators in the process. Even at the end, when it was clear it had become destructive and draining, when we told people that a break-up seemed close, we were counselled to "give it one more try, don't give up on it." No one offered

the obvious and sound advice that it was "time to cut your losses and move on." For those, including Michael and I, who had once believed that we would always be together, breaking up seemed an act of betrayal.

It took a great deal of strength to end the relationship, and even more effort to rebuild my self-worth after it had ended.

It seemed as if my self-esteem had become attached to being part of a couple. What terrible flaw was in me that I was unable to maintain a relationship?

I was reminded of a pop-psychology book I had read earlier with the catchy and appropriate title of "Why Do I Think I am Nothing Without a Man?" It was a long time before I recognized that my talents, interests, abilities and other endearing traits weren't left behind in the apartment Michael and I had shared.

I started finding out something which surprised me. I liked being by myself, I enjoyed having the freedom to structure my day, my friendships, my life without having to worry about how they fit into how someone else was structuring mine for me. The creativity and innovativeness which had disappeared during the relationship made a welcome reappearance. I began, once more, to nurture those things which were important to me.

In the midst of taking care of my own needs, the compulsion to mate disappeared. I had learned to appreciate my own accomplishments (and failures) for what they are. The realization that I don't need another person's undying affection has freed me from the search for love. In the long run, that has allowed love to develop in ways I never imagined possible.

Only when I stopped thinking of every gay man I meet as "husband material" did I learn to really open myself up for loving them. In the process, I have developed some wonderful, meaningful and satisfying relationships with other gay men. Some of those relationships are sexual, some are not, but they all have one thing in common: they allow us to care for and interact with each other without endangering those parts of us which are most vibrant and alive. We love each other for what we are, without a need to mold that into what we would like another to be.

Lovers can change, lovers can leave, lovers can die. But being able to make and keep very dear gay men as friends and brothers, I know that I will never find myself isolated and lonely, but always a connected part of a warm and loving community.

Coupledness is not right for everyone, including me. Some may adjust better than I do to its demands, may find it fulfilling where I find it stifling. To those who do, my congratulations and support. To those who, like myself, exist better on their own, don't cheat yourself by living your life for others' expectations or standards.