

Couples '86

by W.C. McRae

Popular wisdom has it that coupledness is now in vogue for gay people. You've been hearing it. But it is difficult to know whether this belief is based on empirical experience or is intended to be part hopeful prognostication, part plea.

It hasn't always been so. Historically, gay people haven't "coupled," i.e., set up households together. Greek men in ancient Athens tended to maintain traditional homes with their wives and children, meeting lovers of the same sex on neutral ground. In the same spirit, Oscar Wilde left his wife and children at home when he visited Bosie at the Savoy. Proust had his boys (and rodents) brought to his cork-lined apartment in taxis. Gide had his mother install his Arab lover as his servant. George Sand was too busy being the bad lady of letters to settle down with any of her admirers.

Communal living has provided another living alternative for gay people. In the Middle Ages, lesbians and gay men in religious orders found abode in religious communities. Communal living was as common in the 60s as coupling is now, and lesbian or gay communes or co-ops are still common. In such living arrangements, coupling is often viewed as selling out or at least as politically incorrect.

That gay people should pattern their lives on heterosexual roles (that is, couple), is comparatively recent, and when men or women did live together, it was with strict observance of heterosexual roles. Radclyffe Hall was "John" to lover Una Troubridge. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas personified butch-femme roles, borrowed wholesale from straight sex roles. W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman fall into a more modern, though related, butch-femme roleytype, rich partner, poor partner; upper class, lower class.

So to what do we owe the modern "co-partner" type of coupling? Fear of AIDS leading to monogamy is too facile an explanation. Safe sex and "clean living" accomplish the same thing, and AIDS apprehension can't account for women living together. There seems to be a generational factor involved; although the gay movement is still young, it has come of age. Those who were involved in the movement in the '70s are now settling down. The political conservatism of the '80s is leading to a more conservative lifestyle. Gay people in relationships are more socially acceptable to straight people than single gay people, an important consideration as more gay people are incorporated into straight society (and business), thus the "threat" of gay and lesbian sexuality is diverted. Besides, couples don't "put the table out" and nothing's harder than finding a fourth for bridge.

Economics plays a part as well. Two can live cheaper than one, and pooling incomes is often the only way two women can live comfortably. For professionals, however, two incomes can mean considerable buying clout, and in fact, can become its own initiative to couple. In other words, coupling doesn't just lead to a shared income that can then be invested — the investment mentality can lead to coupledness. Choosing the right partner can be as important as selecting the right sofa: if you get the right one, it'll last a long time, and of course, everyone judges your taste by what you surround yourself with.

But where, in this history of couples, does love fit in? Love between members of gay couples (and larger, between couples in a community) is of the accommodating kind; that at its best joins people together in families.

Families? Webster defines it loosely as a household. But "family" has, since the middle '70s, come to connote an increasingly

political entity. In fact, "family," in current political parlance excludes as many people as it includes, whatever the similarities of households involved. Nowadays, to be "pro-family" is to be *against* things. Feminism. Gays. The ERA. Democrats.

It may come as a surprise to habitués of this rhetoric that gay people come from families and in fact, create units that function as *our* families. **Just Out** took to the streets to find out more.

Leslie and Karin

Leslie and Karin live in an intentionally disheveled household in North Portland that does not, repeat does not, include a rabbit. Four cats, Leslie's 18-year-old niece, but no rabbits. Rabbits are an issue. Leslie's for 'em, Karin's agin 'em.

Leslie describes herself as an "Escapee from New Jersey," Karin's native to Portland. They've been together for three years, and both claim to be still in love.

Leslie characterizes the relationship as "symbiotic." Karin likes to cook, Leslie likes to eat; Leslie wants to retire, or at best "just work with queer people," Karin has ambitions in restaurant management.

Leslie had a lot to say about coupling. "It's not a mysterious phenomenon, at least for women. It takes two women to equal the earning power of one man." And in the case of Karin and Leslie, who have no pretensions to wealth, it means that neither has to work as hard (remember, Leslie is into "retirement"). There is also a difference between male and female sexuality: for women, there is no corollary to the baths, where men can go to have sex without the encumbrances of relationships. Women have relationships instead. Women also tend to couple because of their backgrounds. "Women aren't raised to be into fucking," says Leslie. "Instead, they're raised to be into caring." And here she makes a distinction: There's nothing wrong with a nurturing attitude, when it's not role-typed. According to Leslie, it's the difference between "taking care of things, and just butchering through."

After three years of living together, "trading vows" has become an issue between Karin and Leslie. Leslie admits she's a "square." "I feel the need to settle down, and I want something more substantial." A part of her, she says, wants tradition. Her "urge to merge" isn't religious, but more a desire to formalize the commitment she and Karin live with. "If marriage meant what it says it means, that's what I'd want."

Karin isn't so sure. She claims she "doesn't want to commit the future." The issue here perhaps is one of age: Karin is 11 years younger than Leslie.

Commitment may soon arise in another form, however; they're looking into buying a house. Or perhaps, yet another "hotel, with Leslie as matron d' and Karin officiating in the kitchen." It's good news to past patrons of the present Hotel Leslie.

Dave and Charles

Dave and Charles live in a self-consciously too-tasteful apartment in Northeast Portland. They've been living together for a little more than a year, and both freely admit they're "going through flux." "Not *bad* flux," Charles hastens to add, "just *flux* flux." Both Charles and Dave are 30, and Dave says the "flux" in their relationship comes from "forces outside of us, like money."

For Charles, this is his first long-term primary relationship. "I never considered myself a coupler. In fact, I used to take an intellectual pride in disdaining relationships." Charles comes from the Midwest, and spent "more time than necessary going to university." Prior to Dave, there had only been drunken flings and "Extended fantasy." He never "fit into the clone-type well enough to get much trade."

Dave had two long term relationships prior to the present one. He admits to spending a lot of time in bars though — he says he was "Always seeking relationships."

Dave describes himself as "generally pleasant if somewhat odd; dealing with the world as an adult precludes feeling unthreatened." A good relationship should allow the child-side of the personality to emerge, says Dave. "Stages of the past are carried with us all through life. A primary relationship allows us to exhibit them in a relatively uncensored environment."

It's a stressful time for both Dave and Charles, and for the relationship. Money has been increasingly short, as neither have "career-style" jobs. As a result, work schedules preclude much time together, (Charles works nights in a bar, Dave works days for a local theatre), and "our relationship is fit onto the seams" of work obligations. For a comparatively new relationship, the economic considerations of affording at least Charles' lifestyle (he describes himself as "a good-taste faggot whose dream in life is to be perpetually out for dinner") increasingly hasn't allowed them to agree on issues of their living together.

They agree that traditional roles have little to do with them. "We're both too busy trying to earn enough to get by, to decide who'd get to be butch or femme."

Charles and Dave both agree that AIDS didn't have much to do initially with coupling, though Dave describes it now as a "component of fidelity." Charles admits "it increases my commitment to making the relationship work."

As a household, theirs is just this side of the fast lane. Paraphrasing Frost, Charles claims, "Home is where, when you have to go there, you have to have guests." Dave admits, "home seems just to be the place we entertain." Ironically, only by earning more money do they think they can buy the free time to explore the relationship.

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