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A More Perfect Union

Esther Perel on Intimacy, Infidelity, and Desire in Long-Term Relationships

by Mark Leviton

Why does great sex so often fade for couples who claim to love each other as much as ever? Why doesn't intimacy in a relationship guarantee good sex? Why is the forbidden so erotic?

These are just a few of the questions that therapist Esther Perel posed to the global conference organization TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) this past Valentine's Day. Her views were eye-opening. Since it appeared at TED.com in February, Perel's talk has received more than 2 million hits.

Perel became well-known in 2006 after the publication of her best-selling book [Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence](#). But she didn't start her career with a focus on marriage and sexuality. She was interested in politics, society, and cultural identity — in part because she has multiple cultural identities of her own. The daughter of Holocaust survivors, Perel was born in Belgium, where her parents had moved as illegal refugees. Because of this, Perel says, she never felt that she belonged to any one country. Her family spoke five languages at home. (She now speaks nine.) The community in Antwerp where Perel grew up consisted largely of Holocaust survivors like her parents, and she believes her interest in the erotic arose from observations about their capacity to maintain aliveness in the face of adversity and death.

She's become a leader in couples therapy, helping spouses and partners keep their relationships vital over the years. Her theories and techniques sometimes challenge standard psychological and therapeutic models, and she often uses literature as a touchstone, particularly the work of essayist-poet Octavio Paz and novelist-poet D.H. Lawrence, whose poem "Wild Things in Captivity" ("Sex is a state of grace. / In a cage it can't take place.") inspired the title of Mating in Captivity.

Perel has two bachelor's degrees, in educational psychology and French linguistics and literature, from Hebrew University in Jerusalem and has earned an advanced degree at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was trained in family therapy by Dr. Salvador Minuchin in the late eighties and now travels the globe to speak at international conferences. She maintains a private psychotherapy practice in New York City, where she lives with her husband, Jack Saul, who heads the International Trauma Studies Program at Columbia University, and her two sons. Her website, estherperel.com, contains an extensive archive of her publications, lectures (including the TED talk), and blog posts.

She and I arranged to meet at her home when she had a few days off between speaking engagements. When I got to the family's Manhattan loft, Perel was in a meeting that was running late, so her younger son buzzed me in. I was browsing the bookshelves (Faulkner, Sartre, Barthes, Jung) when she breezed in, a bit breathless from the walk up — the building's elevator was out of service. She had a quick conversation with her son in French before we settled down at the dining-room table. With spring light streaming into the room, we talked for nearly two hours about marriage, love, literature, sex, religion, and the mysterious workings of the human heart. Her French-inflected English was charming, and I was impressed by her fierce intellect and passion.

Leviton: You've said that we ask a lot of marriage today, expecting it to satisfy needs that used to be handled by society, friendships, extended family, and so forth. What kind of pressure does this put on couples?

Perel: Too much. They crumble under the weight of expectations. I don't think people have ever demanded so much of a union of two people. Traditionally marriage gave the partners family, children, respectability, social status, companionship, and economic security. Now, on top of everything else, we want our spouses to love us, to desire us, to be interested in us, to be our best friends and trusted confidants and passionate lovers to boot. And we live twice as long as we used to. Our demands are contradictory: Give me predictability; give me surprise. Give me comfort; give me life on the edge. Give me familiarity; give me novelty. Sex toys and lingerie alone are not going to help with all that. Often I ask myself whether the couples who divorce aren't the true idealists: they believe in the model of one person who can provide them with everything; they think they just chose the wrong person, and they'll do better next time.

Leviton: And this model is something new in human history?

Perel: Yes. The institution of marriage has undergone an extreme makeover in the last century. Historically a "passionate marriage" was a contradiction in terms. Matrimony was primarily a matter of economic sustenance. Love could grow between husband and wife, but it had little to do with why they got married. Sex was primarily for reproduction. You needed eight children to work a farm, so you had twelve, because four probably would not survive. If you experienced pleasure, that was a bonus, but it certainly wasn't guaranteed in the marriage contract. Modernity has ushered in marriage as a romantic arrangement where commitments are built on love. Trust and affection have become its sustainable energy source. In the West romance and passion are at the center of the marital plot — and this holds for gay couples and straight couples, boomers and millennials alike.

Author Stephanie Coontz has written about how love conquered marriage. Then we brought sex into love, and for that we had to have the women's movement and the subsequent democratization of contraception. And we needed to be happy as well! So we brought happiness down from the heavens — it used to belong to the afterlife — and made what had been a pursuit into a mandate. People come to me because their spouse isn't making them happy. I don't think any of our grandparents would have considered that a reason to seek therapy. A passionate relationship in which we ask for novelty and mystery from the same person we look to for security and stability — that is a grand new invention in the history of humankind. The problem, for most of my clients, lies in the model as much as in the relationship.

Leviton: Statistics indicate that traditional marriage is not working for the majority of people who try it.

Perel: Almost 50 percent of first marriages end in divorce, and about 65 percent of second marriages. Parisians divorce two times out of three, so it's not better across the Atlantic. And even among those who remain together, duration isn't necessarily the ultimate indicator of marital quality. The more we expect from marriages, the more often they end in dissolution.

There are other factors that contribute to divorce rates. Women used to have to sacrifice their own goals and desires to preserve the family. As that cultural burden has begun to lift, more women are leaving their husbands. Most divorces are initiated by women. I've read that as many as 90 percent of divorces among college-educated couples are the woman's idea, which tells you that when you have greater equality of education and earning, marriage doesn't work so well for women.

Leviton: You often write about preserving privacy in a relationship. How does that work?

Perel: I sometimes describe privacy as "personal intimacy." In the same way that every organism finds a balance between stasis and change, every couple negotiates togetherness and separateness, transparency and privacy. These days the emphasis has shifted toward togetherness, but we still have a need to connect with ourselves in private, to maintain a certain psychological distance from the other person that allows us to go and *visit* him or her. I think what's happened, as we've enshrined intimacy in relationships, is that intimacy has come to mean total transparency: I have a right to know what you're thinking at any moment. And I should be able to tell you what I think all the time. And you should be interested in it and not be distracted. That's a lot of pressure.

It is not a right to know another person's thoughts. It's a privilege. It's not something we're owed; it's something we're granted based on trust. I think spouses today have the idea that it's their due. And God forbid you share your private thoughts with somebody who isn't your spouse.

Leviton: Many people believe love is a merging of personalities.

Perel: Merging is only one piece of the story. People confuse intimacy with the fusing of two individuals for the unified identity of "the couple." We long to connect with and to be recognized by another person; to feel that we are seen and heard. But too often we look for this need to be satisfied by only one person. People should have multiple attachments. I don't mean multiple love partners necessarily, but you need to see yourself reflected by many people. The larger community used to give us a sense that we existed, that we belonged. Now it is our partner. My "significant other" is going to help me transcend my existential aloneness. Caretaking is powerful in a loving relationship, but it can be an anti-aphrodisiac. There is a big difference between neediness and desire. Being desired is great, but being *needed* shuts down romance. Love seeks closeness, but desire needs space to thrive.

Leviton: Is jealousy another side of this need to be seen, as in “I don’t even want you to look at another”?

Perel: I think that’s possessiveness more than jealousy. Jealousy isn’t discussed enough in the U.S. My colleague Michele Scheinkman is Brazilian, and like most South Americans she understands that jealousy is an intrinsic part of love: You compete for your partner’s attention. You want to be the One. You feel jealous because you know you are not the only one. You are bereft if somebody takes your place. And somebody could take your place — that’s life.

We should feel jealous sometimes in a relationship. Brazilians even cultivate jealousy. They stoke the flames a bit — but not too much. As I said, desire needs space like a fire needs air. I just went to a couples-therapy conference where no one mentioned the word *jealousy* except Scheinkman. North Americans experience jealousy, of course, but they think they shouldn’t, so they scorn it.

Leviton: Let’s talk some more about privacy in a relationship. You don’t believe one partner deserves to know everything about the other?

Perel: No. But this is a culturally specific phenomenon as well. I read an article in a French journal this morning called “Secrets Protect the Couple.” I couldn’t imagine this article being published in the U.S., where we have an ethos of absolute frankness and even hurtful candor. The attitude is that I should be able to tell my partner everything, even if I hurt him or her in the process, because these are *my* feelings. In cultures where intimacy is not equated with transparency, people believe certain things are better left unsaid.

A different idea is that preserving secrecy maintains mystery in a relationship. People have always had secrets. They used to die with secrets intact, and their families would discover the truth from their papers after they’d passed away. Now, unfortunately, computers and the Internet leave a digital trail that enables us to stumble upon each other’s secrets much more easily.

Leviton: It seems as if many couples break up because of something seen on Facebook or Twitter or the home computer. And it’s not necessarily the content of the secret that leads to the breakup but the feeling of betrayal when it’s discovered.

Perel: The sense of betrayal stems from the violation of trust and the breach of contract. That said, the definitions of these terms — *privacy*, *secrecy* — are not absolute. They exist within historical, economic, cultural, and religious contexts — and, most importantly, they are affected by the degree of gender equality. If I expect total transparency, and you don’t tell me something, you have violated my expectations. And I’m not just talking about infidelity being discovered. It could be any private matter.

Leviton: You’ve written about the “shadow of the third”: the threat of betrayal that lives in the shadow of every couple.

Perel: Adam Phillips, in his book [Monogamy](#), says that in order not to be alone, you need to be two, but in order to be a couple, you need to be three. The couple is defined by the fact that it separates itself from the third. If you create a boundary, someone has to be on the other side of it. I need to distinguish between the one I chose and the ones I didn’t. Real or imagined, the third is the fulcrum on which a couple balances, the manifestation of our desire for what lies beyond our relationship. It’s the forbidden. Today it’s also our past. Phillips writes that couplehood represents a resistance to the intrusion of the third. In order for a relationship to last, it is indispensable for it to have enemies. Monogamy can’t exist as a choice without them.

Our insistence on absolute sexual exclusivity stems from our anxiety. Because adult sexual love reenacts a primitive form of fusion — the merging of bodies, the breast that fills our entire mouth and leaves us satiated — the thought of our beloved with another can be cataclysmic. A partner’s freedom is threatening because it’s a reminder that he or she also has the freedom not to love you. From the moment you fall in love, you know you could lose this relationship: to death, to illness, or to another person.

Leviton: What can we do about that?

Perel: Instead of denying our anxiety, we could use it to fuel effort and appreciation. Pretending the other person is here to stay is an illusion that often leads to complacency and laziness, and it allows us to behave badly with our partners. Of course, if the fear is too intense, you can be made crazy by the possibility. What you want is a balance between denial and delusion.

Leviton: So if a client tells you of his or her need to feel absolutely secure in the relationship, you point out the impossibility of this?

Perel: Yes, I do. You can believe you’re secure, but, as Stephen Mitchell says [in his book [Can Love Last?](#)], it’s a contrived illusion of safety. Coming from my background, as a child of two concentration-camp survivors who lost everybody in their families, I don’t find the thought that security is an illusion much of a stretch. I’m very clear we need security *and* freedom, but since so many other therapists are working on security, I’ve decided to focus on freedom. This fits my history. My parents fought for freedom first, then security. I write more on discovery, exploration, and travel and less on

the anchor, the grounding element, and the secure base. But that doesn't mean I don't honor the need for both.

In a healthy relationship people live with the knowledge that the other person isn't automatically there to stay. A spouse will stay if he or she feels compelled to stay. You'd better behave in a way that makes marriage attractive to your partner. Today, in the West, the only thing that keeps a couple together is the relative contentment of the two people involved — not the church, not the kids, and not the courts. You have to offer not just reliability but also surprise. And novelty in a relationship is not a mere repertoire of bedroom techniques. It involves new ways to let yourself be seen.

Leviton: I want to talk about fantasy. You point out that if you fantasize about having a Hawaiian vacation, you probably would really like to go to Hawaii, but if you fantasize about being tied up in bed, it may not be something you actually want to do in real life. How do you see the role of fantasy in relationships?

Perel: We need a better example than Hawaii. If a kid plays prisoner, he doesn't really want to *be* a prisoner; he just wants to *play* at being prisoner, partly because it helps him master his fear of being locked up, and partly because we can only play at something that isn't an aspect of our everyday condition. That is the central ingredient for the imagination.

Some erotic fantasies people want to enact, some they just want to talk about, and some they only want to think about. Knowledge is finite; imagination is endless. If we don't want to act on a fantasy, the question is: Are we really not interested in its materializing, or are we ashamed of it? Sometimes our sexual fantasies baffle us. We can't believe we'd actually be turned on by that. What does it say about us? We're weird. But, like dreams, fantasies are symbolic scripts for our deepest emotional needs. They rarely mean what they appear to mean on the surface and must be decoded. What does being tied up mean to *you*? One person might say, "It helps me realize that I have no choice but to receive. I don't have to feel guilty about receiving, because it's the other person who decides to give." As psychologist Michael Bader so beautifully says, a good fantasy both states the problem and offers the solution. I always ask: What need does this fantasy serve? I might fantasize about spreading peanut butter on my skin because I never thought someone could delight in licking me. It could be a redemptive experience: I can be delicious.

If you want to know the deepest feelings a person brings to sex, ask about her fantasies. The gestures involved, the physicality of it, are like words for a poet. You need the words, but the poem has another meaning beneath the words. Octavio Paz says, "Eroticism is the poetry of the body, the way poetry is the eroticism of the word."

Leviton: People often fear their partners will judge them for having a particular fantasy.

Perel: Yes, we don't want to reveal our fantasies, because we can smell judgment. So the fantasy will go underground and not emerge until it feels safe. A fantasy is a more naked truth than many others. And couples don't have to share their fantasies; they can be kept personal and private. Everybody has a little secret garden.

Leviton: You've said that adult intimacy is like hide-and-seek.

Perel: Yes, because there is nothing more thrilling than to hide when you know somebody's looking for you. And it's terrifying to think that person has stopped looking for you. When children who are hiding think no one is seeking, they cry and come out, afraid they've been forgotten. So we play the adult version of hide-and-seek. And you need two or more people to play. Otherwise it's like sitting alone and playing a board game and pretending you are all the players.

When you fantasize alone, you do play all the parts. Kids don't want to go to the doctor, but they like to play doctor. They don't want their house to burn, but they like to play fireman. A fantasy is a piece of fiction, and you are the scriptwriter, the actor, and the director. You get to decide the whole thing, and always for the purpose of pleasure.

Leviton: Aren't some fantasies symptoms of something that needs to be healed in the psyche, rather than something that deserves expression?

Perel: Why should any fantasy be seen as a sickness to be cured? If we can't have fantasies, we can't tolerate living. It's because we have the capacity to fantasize that we can avoid thinking about death all the time. We can fantasize about the breasts we no longer have, the hair we no longer have, the youth we no longer have.

Leviton: So you reject shame?

Perel: Society's major mechanisms for controlling sexuality have always been shame and guilt. This is true in every culture and every religion. The liberal Western outlook says that as long as the activity is between consenting adults, people should be able to do anything they want. And if two individuals have personal sovereignty, take responsibility for their choices, and choose freely, then there is nothing wrong with that. But bringing that idea to a culture with a different perspective is a problem. A collectivist system, where a person's actions are understood to affect his or her community, cannot accept the Western liberal framework.

So if we want to talk about sexual fantasy and transgression and what is "normal" or "deviant," all I can tell you is that what was once deviant is now normal practice, and what today is an aberration was in previous eras commonplace, from

pedophilia, to homosexuality, to masturbation, to circumcision. Today, if you do it — whatever “it” is — something’s wrong, but before, if you didn’t do it, you were suspect. “Normal” is a fluctuating concept.

For example, for most of history women were accused of having too much desire. Now they have too little! Today in the U.S. we don’t talk about “nymphomaniacs” or worry about “oversexed” females. Instead we spend billions of dollars on research into “hyposexual desire disorder” in women — a lack of sexual interest. Why? Because we want to invent a female Viagra and make millions of dollars. In the seventies oral sex was considered more intimate than intercourse. Today blow jobs are nothing, and what’s considered really intimate is *kissing!*

Every civilization controls sexuality, from Greeks to Romans, Jews to Christians. We have Lent, and we have the bacchanals. Every civilization decides what’s normal, what’s needed, what’s desired, what’s perverse.

The Zohar, a book of Jewish mysticism, is all about eroticism and about maintaining our sense of aliveness in the face of suffering. Judaism is a pro-sex religion. There’s no cult of chastity in it. Jewish tradition didn’t vilify the body and make it debased in relation to the spirit. So when people talk about a “Judeo-Christian perspective” on sexuality, they actually conflate two very different views.

Leviton: The culture defines the norms, but individuals often want to go outside them. Why is the forbidden so erotic?

Perel: It’s one thing to do what you want when you’re allowed to do it, but another to do what you want when it is *not* allowed. We experience true freedom not when we don’t have any restrictions but when we *trample* restrictions. Even if we move as a society toward a more fluid definition of monogamy as a “continuum,” as sex-and-relationship expert Tammy Nelson so insightfully writes about it, we’ll still need the generative force of tasting the forbidden fruit, breaking taboos, overcoming limitations — and not just societal ones but internal ones as well. Think of a boy who does something naughty and gives you a look that says, “See what I just did?” He’s on top of the world. He owns it. You feel more alive when you are transgressing. It doesn’t have to be big — just something you don’t typically do, something that goes beyond your own boundaries. Staying in bed an extra ten minutes in the morning can be enough for some.

Leviton: Most of us have an inner voice of shame, and when we transgress, we are talking back to it.

Perel: Yes. It’s such fun. It doesn’t have to be sexual at all. Everyone knows creativity and transgression are related. When you create, you come up with something no one else has. Every new movement in art is transgressive, because it goes against the rules. This is the creative force. It’s the juice that can fuel your art, your sports, your social life, your sex life. Modernity turned the meaning of *eros* to sex, but it once meant anything you use to beat back deadness. Eroticism is an energy you can apply everywhere.

Octavio Paz wrote a book called *The Double Flame* in which he explains the difference between sexuality and eroticism. Sexuality, he says, is the biology, the primordial urge, and the animal instinct, and it can’t be separated from its reproductive function. Eroticism is sexuality transformed and socialized by the human imagination.

That opened up a whole new vista to me when I read it. I began to realize that the central agent of the erotic act is the imagination. You can “make love” for hours and experience bliss but physically touch nobody. You don’t even need the act. Eroticism is about the poetics of sex. It’s linked to ritual, to celebration.

Leviton: With such a multicultural experience and professional practice, you must be very aware of cultural differences.

Perel: Of course. I once saw a presentation at a U.S. conference about a couple who’d experienced a sharp decline in their sexual activity. Previously they had engaged in light sadomasochism, but after their second child was born, the wife wanted more-conventional sex. They were stuck. The presenter talked about working through the emotional dynamics of the marriage and their status as parents, but it was clear from the discussion afterward that the audience was far more interested in the sadomasochistic sex. Several people wanted to know what was behind the husband’s need to “objectify” his wife. After two hours, no one had mentioned pleasure or eroticism, so I finally spoke up. I said I couldn’t help wondering whether the clinicians in the room believed that the couple’s sexual activities — though consensual and nonviolent — were too kinky for the ponderous world of marriage and children.

Ironically some of this country’s best features — such as its belief in equality, tolerance, and compromise — when carried too punctiliously into the bedroom, can make for boring sex. Sexual desire is not about being good citizens. Sexual excitement is politically *incorrect* and often thrives on power plays, role reversals, demands, seduction, manipulation. But Americans don’t appreciate ambiguity in sexual relations; they want clarity. They experiment sexually outside their primary relationships but are tame and puritanical with their partners at home. So their sex lives suffer. They grow bored. Some of my patients are aroused only by affairs, pornography, prostitutes, cybersex. There’s an enormous commoditization of sex in the world today. The explicitness of sexual products undermines the mystery, the pleasure of the hidden. Where nothing is hidden, nothing is erotic. And porn and cybersex can be very isolating, disconnected forms of interaction.

Leviton: How does your approach with clients differ from that of your American colleagues?

Perel: For one thing, I don't think attraction to someone outside the marriage is always a problem. In *Mating in Captivity* I describe Ryan and Christine, who were struggling with the transition of becoming the parents of three small children. They remembered the intensity of their early relationship and didn't want to resign themselves to dull lovemaking. By the time I saw them, they were already renting erotic videos, taking baths together, and having weekly dates. I told them I had nothing new to offer in the "how-to" department, and that I wanted them to focus not on "working at it" but on the "play" in their relationship. I asked them to think about how marriage made them *more* free, not less, and about how much freedom they could accept for each other and themselves. I was trying to jolt them out of complacency and create discomfort. Ryan and Christine were unhappy, but I wasn't sure they were unhappy enough to take risks and generate change.

Several months later Ryan began a private session with me by talking about his attraction to his wife's best friend, Barbara, who was visiting them. Barbara was beautiful, independent, and politically active, a serial monogamist with no kids. He'd developed a strong crush on her. He said her energy woke him up, breaking through his "shut-down" feeling, although he hadn't kissed her or even flirted. I didn't discourage Ryan's fantasies about his wife's friend. Instead I encouraged him to relish the experience without endangering his marriage. I wanted him to know how great it was that he could still come to life with such energy, but I reminded him that this intoxicated state couldn't be compared with home life, because "home" is safe.

At the next private session Ryan described going out to dinner with Christine and Barbara, who both pretty much ignored him as they talked about their lives and drank wine. Ryan was shocked when Christine started to express her feeling that marriage and kids were oppressive and her regret that she'd spent her life doing only what was expected of her. As if Ryan weren't there, she told Barbara that she was mired in drudgery and felt trapped. Ryan was angry and anxious about her complaints, but he was also intrigued. He, too, had been missing freedom and wanting more out of life. As the dinner continued, Ryan became captivated by his wife. He identified with her and was more turned on by her than he had been in a long time. His fascination with Barbara vanished.

This is often how my therapy works, but nobody can plan for it: the same events with another couple might have triggered abandonment issues and caused a huge fight. In this case Ryan's renewed desire came from Christine's reassertion of her separateness and her dreams. He was choosing her again, and that act of choice is what keeps a relationship alive.

Leviton: As we age, our sex drives decline due to hormones and other factors. Should older couples expect sex to sizzle the same way it did when they were young?

Perel: No! There's no way it will be the same. We don't do anything the same way at seventy-five as we did at twenty-five. Sex changes — the expression of it, the energy of it, the rhythm of it, the acrobatics of it. But that doesn't mean the level of satisfaction has to decline. Sex can be just as satisfying, maybe even more satisfying, as we grow older.

We don't have one sexuality; we have *sexualities*, which change with the partners we have, with our health, with the countries we live in, with our age. People used to die shortly after they were done raising kids. Now they are entering my office at sixty-five and asking, "Is this it?"

Leviton: And because we live so long, we've got marriages that go on for thirty, forty, fifty years.

Perel: A relationship must adapt to current realities. Issues of time, age, physical condition, and side effects of medications all influence it. At the same time, people can continue to be sexually active until they drop dead. It's just that what constitutes sexual activity may change.

So can a couple be sexually satisfied over the long haul? Absolutely. But what is actually involved in sex at each stage can be quite different. The question should be about satisfaction, not sexual positions.

Leviton: Can people thrive without physical contact?

Perel: No. Even if people are not sexual, they still need affection. We are touch-oriented creatures. If we are not touched, we become irritable, aggressive, and depressed. Some people may not be as sexual as they once were, but they can remain intensely physical.

Leviton: Is it possible to have a happy and fulfilling relationship without having sex at all?

Perel: I'm often asked this question. My first answer is: Who am I to answer for someone else? Ask a couple in a sexless relationship if they are happy.

When clients come into my office, they think they know what they should want, what they should feel. I always ask, "Do you miss the sex, or do you think you *should* miss it?" People used to feel guilty for having sex; now we feel guilty for not having it. Both are tyrannies.

Many of my clients talk about being married to their “best friend,” and it’s a perfectly viable option if it’s what both people want. If one person longs to have a sexual dimension to the relationship and the other doesn’t, however, then it’s a different story. Some couples maintain a certain erotic spark into their eighties, a physicality, just a way of smiling at each other, of looking at each other, of walking in the park holding hands. Everybody notices it. But if those who don’t have it don’t miss it, they can get along fine. They have companionship and someone they can trust, and those ingredients are more important to them than the erotic dimension. It all has to do with what they expect from a relationship.

Leviton: Have you worked with couples whose religious beliefs have caused problems with their sex life?

Perel: Religion does influence our sex life. There’s a view that the people in this country who have the most sex (outside of the porn industry) are Orthodox Jews and Mormons, because it is prescribed by their religion. They don’t need to ask, “Am I in the mood?” It’s what they are supposed to do. That doesn’t mean the sex is good, or even pleasurable, but at least they do it.

I work with a lot of people who, due to their religious traditions, arrive at marriage sexually ignorant. Then comes that honeymoon night, and they’re just supposed to know what to do. For all these years it’s been forbidden, sinful, dirty, and shameful, and now suddenly it’s supposed to become fantastic.

Unsatisfying sex is certainly the reality for way too many couples, but there are also very religious couples who have beautiful sexual relationships.

Leviton: It seems to me you are critical of mainstream psychotherapy for being too verbal, too talky. You call the body the “original mother tongue.”

Perel: Within psychology I don’t belong to any chapel. I’m an integrationist. I will take from many sources, study the various approaches, and choose the method that fits the specific client rather than using the same one with all cases.

I’m not critical of verbal therapy — I practice it myself — but I think we have overlooked the body for sure. We need to integrate sexuality into the broader subject of overall health and quality of life. Especially in couples therapy there’s an assumption that sex is only a metaphor for the rest of the relationship: fix the relationship, and good sex will follow. That’s what I want to criticize.

Leviton: *Mating in Captivity* has been translated into twenty-five languages, yet you haven’t published another book since it came out in 2006.

Perel: I’m working on a new one about infidelity. The first book was about desire on the inside, so this one will be about desire on the outside: when desire looks elsewhere. It’s the result of two years of roaming the world talking about infidelity. I’ve spoken to evangelical Christians, to Israelis, to American psychologists, and so far no one has thrown tomatoes. So I hope I have a way of presenting it that will be thoughtful.

Leviton: How does your take on infidelity differ from the standard view?

Perel: I don’t abide by the perpetrator-victim model of infidelity, in which the cheater is criminalized and the victim is given all the empathy. I also don’t believe an affair automatically means the relationship is bad. Here’s the usual view: If we, as a couple, have everything we want from each other, there’s no reason for either of us to go elsewhere. Hence, if one of us goes elsewhere, there’s something missing between us; infidelity is a symptom of a problem in the relationship.

That’s sometimes the case, but affairs often have more to do with the unfaithful individual than with the couple. People go elsewhere for sex not so much because they want to leave their partners but because they want to escape who they themselves have become. They are looking for parts of themselves that they’ve lost because of the relationship. But many adulterers are reasonably content in their marriage and monogamous in their beliefs. In my experience most have been faithful for ten or fifteen years before they’ve cheated.

If you see adultery only as a symptom, you sometimes take good relationships that have worked well for decades and make them look like failures. I don’t think that’s right. You raised your kids, you buried your parents, you created a home, you dealt with bankruptcy or cancer — and then one of you has an affair, and suddenly we’re going to call it a “failed marriage”? It privileges this one event over every other thing that’s happened in the relationship.

Other times couples have left each other in many ways long before the affair — and that includes the so-called victims, who may have been sexually withholding or satisfying themselves with porn and ignoring the partner. And then, because they’re not the one who cheated, they think it’s all their spouse’s fault. Betrayal comes in many forms, and maybe one form doesn’t deserve to rank higher than all the others.

And there are still other causes of affairs. I think longing and loss are in the background of many infidelities — the loss of who we once were, but also just death. I ask the unfaithful partners if they have lost someone recently: a parent, a friend. Or have they gotten bad news from the doctor? When mortality hits home and life feels short, people want to feel alive.

The novelty of a new relationship reconnects us to desire.

Leviton: So you advise couples to see the infidelity as an opportunity to learn about themselves and each other?

Perel: It depends. Am I working with the unfaithful person alone, or am I with the couple? And at what stage of the affair? If I'm with them the day after it's been revealed, that's one situation. If it's two years later, that's another. An affair is never good, but good things can come out of it.

I've seen couples in which I'm convinced there's an affair going on but no one wants to talk about it. I've seen couples in which one person keeps asking the question and the other keeps denying it, or one keeps dropping hints and the other doesn't want to pick up on them. I've had clients who are resisting having an affair, and others who can't talk clearly about their marriage because they are intoxicated by an ongoing affair and everything else pales in comparison. Or they are irritable and don't want to go home because of their guilt or because they don't like their partner at the moment. Other clients might want to be in the relationship, but their partner has Alzheimer's and can't recognize them, and they need a way to rejuvenate themselves so they can spend an hour every day with their partner at the nursing home. I hear about kinds of infidelities that never existed before now, but infidelity itself is timeless. At all four corners of the world, at any moment, someone is either betraying a beloved or being betrayed. Infidelity: historically condemned, universally practiced.

I don't think an affair by definition has to kill a marriage. It can be beyond painful, and it takes time to heal, but divorce is not always better than working through the betrayal. What are the specifics of the infidelity? With whom? How long? I don't condemn, but that doesn't mean I condone, much less promote.

Leviton: You also don't offer a knee-jerk defense of monogamy when couples have negotiated something different.

Perel: Monogamy isn't without its flaws. For centuries there was a double standard that said men could cheat and women couldn't. Monogamy was an imposition on women.

I have noticed that people sometimes confuse non-monogamy with infidelity. Infidelity exists in non-monogamous couples as well. It's a violation of the other person's trust. If people come to me and say they want to negotiate the sexual boundaries of their relationship to have emotional monogamy but not necessarily sexual exclusivity, I will help them with that. We need multiple models. One-size-fits-all isn't working very well. Gay people are taking the lead on this. Many heterosexual couples proclaim monogamy and practice clandestine adultery. Most gay couples at least understand that monogamy needs to be negotiated.

Leviton: Some therapists believe non-monogamous relationships are not sustainable.

Perel: Yes, and they think if you want one, it means you are immature and selfish and don't want to grow up. To which I say, "You think the prevailing model works so well?" It's merely a social construction that's being defended, and we've all been drinking the same Kool-Aid for the last 150 years. I'm part of it; I've spent thirty years with the same partner. But intellectual honesty demands that we not hide from the statistics.

It's legitimate to be scared of losing one's partner to someone else, but I believe the future of romantic love lies in flexibility. If we're not going to have more flexibility, then people will just divorce and remarry, divorce and remarry. I'm amazed that Americans can be so tolerant of multiple divorces and so intransigent toward infidelity. Why is the dissolution of all family bonds preferable to compromise? Sometimes an affair is a method of preserving the family. Maybe the sex isn't good in the primary relationship, but for the most part it works beautifully, and neither partner wants to lose the kids, so they agree to the affair. Why think in black and white? The complexities of love and desire are enormous.

It's important in my practice for me to create a nonjudgmental, nuanced, welcoming environment in which the couple can experience self-determination. It is not for me to say how other people should live their lives or to be a defender of marriage or a promoter of divorce.

Leviton: What if someone says to you, "People tried consensual non-monogamy in the seventies, and it didn't work"?

Perel: I'll point out that in the seventies couples were rejecting the whole idea of marriage and the bourgeois concepts that went with it. It has nothing to do with what people are trying to do today, which is to combine their need for committed relationships with their need for personal fulfillment. Everything in society tells them to do this. The capitalist system can't exist without exhorting people to seek personal fulfillment. Otherwise they wouldn't shop! The younger people who are negotiating these new definitions of committed relationships are the children of the divorced and the disillusioned. They are looking for a way to stay together and hoping that making agreements that allow for more fluidity and more personal space will help them do this. Will it work? For some. Some people are more monogamous, others more exploratory. Advice columnist Dan Savage calls what we have now "monogamish."

Leviton: What about polyamory?

Perel: Polyamory is not the same as non-monogamy. Polyamory is more about creating a community or network of relationships. From research we know that people who grow up in polyamorous families, when the arrangements work, are much more satisfied with their relationships and their sexuality as adults, because they speak to their partners more and negotiate a lot. It's an arduous process, but as a rule couples who talk to one another about sex do better than couples who basically talk to everyone except each other.

Studies of polyamorous families seem to indicate that they can be sustained. Many years ago, when I started working with couples of mixed religions, everyone was saying, "Interfaith marriage doesn't work." Today Catholic-Protestant marriages in the U.S. are commonplace. Jewish people now marry non-Jews 50 percent of the time. The boundaries get pushed. And when it succeeds, those couples are stronger for it, because they've had to work through all kinds of challenges and tension between separateness and togetherness, blending and preservation of the self.

Leviton: You've said, "Tell me how you were loved, and I'll tell you how you make love." What did your upbringing teach you about love, and how did that lead you to become a therapist?

Perel: I didn't choose this profession because I wanted to help people. I got interested in psychology because I wanted to understand and help myself. I was also interested in cross-cultural psychology from day one: how cultural norms apply in one place and not another. I think it had to do with my family's background. Because my parents were refugees, I wanted the world to be an open place, and nobody was going to close a door on *me* because I was a Jew. And since I don't belong anywhere, I may as well go everywhere.

Leviton: You write that Holocaust survivors were confronted with a choice: to grab hold of life, or to seek security.

Perel: In my community of survivors there were two groups: those who merely survived, and those who revived. Those who just survived didn't play, because you cannot be on guard while you are playing. If they had a good time, it meant they weren't watching out for danger. Their houses had that heaviness to them. The curtains were drawn. You felt these people weren't really living.

The other group chose to keep their vitality, energy, and eros. I am very lucky to be from one of those families. It's not enough not to be in pain. It's important to be alive and to experience pleasure and joy.

Leviton: You also write about how childhood is where we first experience power dynamics in relationships and learn how to take risks, how to move away and come back.

Perel: Today there is a proliferation of therapies that say we have one fundamental human need: a secure attachment. Once we have that, we can leap into the world; we can separate and explore. But desire resides in separateness. Desire is about curiosity and discovery. It's *not* about security, even if you first need security to have the freedom to explore. To love is to have, but to desire is to want. Foregone conclusions do not keep our interest.

Leviton: You've said that couples focus too much on children in the United States, elevating their position in the family.

Perel: I'd say it's an issue in the West in general, not just in the U.S. Never have children been so central to a marriage or so sentimentalized as they are today. Children used to provide us with their labor; now they give us meaning. They used to be an economic asset; now they're an economic drain. Parents feel a need to participate in the child's every activity, so there's no space for the adults. Why can't the children go to their sports practice alone? Does every parent have to stand on the sidelines and applaud each time the little Smurf touches the ball?

I'm convinced this overwhelming focus on the children hurts the parents' relationship. Fifteen years ago I wasn't hearing couples say that they hadn't gone out on a date in three years. This nonstop child-rearing sucks energy from the union. Women have long known that parental responsibilities decrease the erotic charge. Some couples can re-create that space for themselves when the kids leave home, but some cannot. So at this point we have three marriages: one before kids, one with kids, and one after kids. It's not possible to have a model in which parents are available to their children to the degree we demand they be today *and* be emotionally available to each other in a romantic way. There needs to be a balance.

Leviton: Moms and dads fear they'll be bad parents if they don't do every last thing they can for their children.

Perel: Yes, and God forbid my kid would feel bad or frustrated. What I'm seeing already in the younger generation of couples is that they are losing their desire for each other earlier and earlier — because if you haven't known frustration, it's harder to know desire. You need to *not* have in order to know what it's like to want. We are raising a generation that has been protected from feeling bad. We used to believe frustration was part of growing up, that it built character. Now no one is left out of anything. Everybody gets a trophy at the end of the game.

I'd be the last one to say that the previous generation was glorious, but we can see that certain child-rearing practices have their consequences — for the children and for the parents. Many couples with children aren't closing the bedroom door. They're expecting the kids to walk in. They have monitors so they can hear the little ones in their cribs at all times. Parents

shouldn't be afraid to say no to their kids; they shouldn't be afraid of tantrums. Kids should be allowed to feel bad. It's how children learn to be healthy adults. And parents shouldn't feel guilty, thinking that every time kids feel bad it compromises their self-esteem.

Leviton: You advise couples not to plan for sex but to create a space in which to experience a sense of aliveness.

Perel: My advice is not to plan for a specific sexual encounter, but there is still preparation. When my clients wax nostalgic about the early days of spontaneous sex, I remind them that, even then, what happened was often the result of hours, if not days, of preparation. What outfit, what topic of conversation, which restaurant, what music? Spontaneous sex is a fabulous idea, but in an ongoing relationship whatever is going to "just happen" already has. Sex in a committed relationship is intentional. I sometimes joke that foreplay starts when the current orgasm ends. Sex is a place you go, a space you enter. It's a language, not just a behavior. And you still need to seduce your partner after many years of marriage. You still use mystery to entice, letting your partner get to know you intimately.

When we've won the object of our desire, it's a type of loss. Getting what we want takes away the thrill of wanting it, the deliciousness of yearning, the strategies of pursuit, the charged fantasies. Some people report that they are particularly attracted to their partner at a party, when they catch a glimpse of him or her across a room, looking radiant, maybe enthralling a stranger. They can look at their spouse with new eyes, as a person who is self-sufficient.

Leviton: Do you work with couples on the sex act itself?

Perel: I do a fair amount of sex education, but I'm not a sex therapist by training, nor a sex educator. I focus on desire, not dysfunction. Besides, the best solutions often come from my clients, not from me. Once they understand what's at stake, it's amazing how imaginative they can be. But if they are having trouble in bed, I try to help them look at the problem differently. Most people come in talking about what their partner does that turns them off. They forget that we are responsible for our own desire. You can make a person have sex, but you can never make him or her want it.

Rather than ask what my partner does or doesn't do, I ask, "When do I turn *myself* off?" I turn myself off when I answer e-mails before bed, when I don't take care of myself, when I don't spend time in nature, when I don't play enough music, when I work too hard, when I worry about my kids, when I'm anxious or stressed. It's got nothing to do with my partner's advances. My partner might do wonderful things, but if I'm turned off, there's nobody at the reception desk.

When do I turn myself on? When I take time for myself, when I think fondly of my past, when I think lovingly of my partner, when I travel, when I have enough money.

Leviton: I've spoken to sex educators who teach women how to experience pleasure. They say their main obstacle is not mechanical process or technique but getting the women to really believe they deserve pleasure.

Perel: Our sense of self-worth is connected to desire, because in order to want something, you need to feel entitled to it. For the best sex we need the freedom to give, to receive, to take, to ask, and to refuse. But you can't have those until you also know that you deserve to drink your coffee seated in the morning instead of gulping it while you get the kids ready for school. You deserve to say, "I've done enough," or, "I've cleaned enough tonight."

Regarding sex, you deserve to say to your partner, "I need you to have patience with me and trust that I'm not going to take too long and bore you." You need that sense of self-worth and being lovable and desirable. As we just talked about, how you make love tells me how you were loved. Some people grow up never being asked what they need or what another person can do to make them feel good. Maybe they had to run away to feel safe, because the home they grew up in was dangerous, or they were told they had enough and shouldn't want anything more. Some were told not to cry or laugh or make noise. These people have a hard time staying connected to their sexuality.

Leviton: When you see a couple as clients, are you also doing individual therapy with each of them?

Perel: Yes, because certain things are better discussed when the partner isn't present. I recently saw a gay couple, a loving couple who have made a home together, but one of them cannot be sexual with the other. It's sad and painful for them both. Some people can't have sex within the family. In a private session I could ask this man, "When he touches you, why do you recoil? Is sex for you connected to a certain kind of aggression, or ruthlessness or energy that you think you can't have with him? Do you think sex belongs to the darker side of you, and he represents the light? How did this become your kind of sexuality?"

For some of my clients the threat of merging in the sexual act, and the ensuing loss of self, is so intense that they defend against it by shutting down or taking their desire elsewhere. One client, whom I call James in *Mating in Captivity*, had a good marriage with his wife, Stella, but sex had always been a problem for them. They'd been married for thirty-one years, raised four kids, and toasted the birth of their first grandchild. Yet in the sexual realm James was still worried about his performance, and he raced to give Stella an orgasm before he lost his erection. Anything out of the ordinary they tried only further jeopardized his ability to perform. Stella got angry; James got defensive.

Then Stella entered menopause. Her sex drive plummeted, and James's lack of initiative, once obscured by her eagerness, had become glaring. She told me she felt as if they were roommates.

James was quick to blame his performance anxiety. I asked him if he ever had anxiety-free sex, and he said, "Only when I masturbate." This confirmed that there was no organic difficulty. James just didn't know how to enjoy himself sexually in the presence of the woman he loved. It turned out James's mother had been extremely needy. Because of this, he experienced Stella's desire as a demand rather than an invitation, an obligation rather than a seduction.

James and Stella thought their difficulty was permanent, but together we mapped out a course of action. I told them to leave the bedroom and the bed that had "failure" written all over it and to find other places in the house to make love. I also suggested that James masturbate next to Stella, to experience the possibility of pleasing himself in her presence and reinforce the idea that his pleasure didn't have to hurt her.

The results of the masturbation experiment were only so-so. James's self-consciousness got the better of him, and there was no dramatic transformation. But a few days later, during a big argument, something started to shift. James wanted to hold Stella but was worried she was too angry. He pushed through that feeling and held her anyway. Stella wasn't responsive at first, and in the past James would have retreated at that point. This time, however, he made his own choice and did what felt best to him instead of focusing on her cues. He rubbed her back, and she calmed down; he discovered he could withstand her intensity. This led to what they both recounted separately as "wonderful lovemaking."

It takes two people to create a pattern, but only one to change it.

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* *What is to give light must endure burning.* – *Viktor Frankl*

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