

The Art of Asking Everything

Dan Savage: Sex Rules Us

Amanda Palmer 00:36

Welcome to The Art of Asking Everything, this is your host Amanda Fucking Palmer. It's a good episode to be a fucking person, this week's episode is a conversation with Dan Savage, it's called Sex Rules Us, see what we did there? It's like a quintuple-entendre. Sex, us, rules, rules, sex, are there any?

I first saw Dan Savage, the author, journalist, LGBT community activist, and long-time writer of [Savage Love](#), which is an internationally syndicated relationship and sex advice column, at a speaking gig, when I was probably 18 years old. He came to my college. And all I knew about him was oh, this guy who talks about sex is coming to my college to speak to the students, and I was like, I wanna hear anybody talking about sex, in any way, that sounds awesome.

And I remember watching Dan Savage sitting there in this bleak fluorescently-lit science lecture hall at Wesleyan University, in his hoodie, and it's weird the things you remember. I actually remember Dan burying his knees in the hoodie, like he had knee turtle heads, and he was just like, hiding there, sitting in this chair, with his knees tucked under his hoodie, he was just like, I don't care that I'm in a fancy college talking to 300 students and getting paid to do it, I am still going to put my knees in my hoodie and spin around in my chair while I talk to them about sex.

And I don't remember specifically any of the questions that he answered, or exactly what he talked about, but I do remember being taken aback by how honest he was. And if I learned anything while I was in college, and I'm still sifting and trying to figure out what I actually learned those four godforsaken, very miserable, slightly suicidal, Zoloff-soaked years of my life, I think I learned most of what I learned in college by just watching people like Dan be unafraid to talk about things. And I got access to a few people like that, and if I have Wesleyan to thank for anything, it's that they booked this dude to talk to this group of random students.

There's something about seeing human beings unafraid to talk about things that people don't talk about. And I think of all these moments in my life, like when I saw Dan when I was 18 talking so openly about sex, and when I first saw [Margaret Cho doing stand-up](#), and talking about shit people didn't talk about, and when I first heard an [Ani DiFranco song](#), and I heard her singing about shit women didn't sing about, and I would stand there aghast, and I feel like I can string all those moments together into a string of Christmas tree lights that sort of guide the way to me in my 40s, to eventually be able to tell my own truth, and say my own thing.

And when I first started this podcast, Dan Savage was one of my number one fantasy guests, and we finally got together to do this conversation in Seattle, in a little recording studio, in early

June 2019, while I was wrapping up the American leg of my overly truthful *There Will Be No Intermission* stage tour.

And as people who have both been very openly in open relationships, one of the things I really wanted to talk to Dan about was exactly that. Because open relationships are really hard for many people to understand. And I've been in and out of multiple open relationships for probably 30 years of my life, and it's still a really hard thing for the people I know in my life to wrap their heads around. And I swear, if I had a dollar for every time someone just stared at me with spinning eyes over the last 30 years and said, but that does not compute, how can you be in love and do that? Or my other favourite, wait, what do you mean, your partner cheated on you? I thought you were in an open relationship? I would be able to fund this podcast without patronage, I'd have a lot of money.

But I think, look around. It's a lot more normal. People are getting used to it. And more important, people are getting used to talking about it. So as someone like Dan, who's been doing it for many decades, and has been hanging out with people who are in open relationships, or they're polyamorous or what have you, I actually think it's a good time in my life, even though it's kind of scary, to start sharing what I've learned. What's hard about it, what's weird about it, what works, what doesn't work. And why, at the end of the day, really all it takes is truth and a big dose of compassion. Those are really the main ingredients of love.

And love can look like fucking anything at all, if you can expand your imagination. And people like Dan, and the way he writes in *Savage Love* they really remind me constantly that infinite sorts of love are possible, and that our stories and narratives, and our brains, are so teeny compared to what's really out there.

So I obviously cannot stress how honoured I was to interview my old hero, Dan Savage, who by the way also has his own mega podcast called *Savage Love*. If you don't know his work, and you do listen to podcasts, highly recommend it, you should listen.

And now, without further ado, Dan Savage.

Amanda 07:00

What's the quickest way to describe awesome Dan Savage?

Dan Savage 07:04

I stumbled into a joke sex advice column 30 years ago, and ended up accidentally becoming a sex advice columnist.

Amanda 07:10

It's no joke now.

Dan 07:11

It's no joke now, after about six months, it wasn't a joke any more. So I've been writing Savage Love for almost 30 years. It's syndicated in 70, 80 papers still, and for the last 10 years been doing the [Savage Lovecast](#), which is a call-in sex advice podcast show with guests, and a little longer word count on a podcast and in columns.

Amanda 07:28

Do you like podcasting?

Dan 07:29

Yeah, I didn't get it at first. Literally, I did it for five years before I listened to any podcasts, because I'm a Luddite, and a late adopter of all technologies. And so I was doing the podcast because, as I like to call them the tech savvy at risk youth at work, made me start doing it a decade ago, before anybody else was doing podcasts really. And then it just kind of took off

Amanda 07:49

When you're listening to people and then answering them, and trying to give them a good, unfiltered, real, honest, helpful piece of advice, do you find that it is easier or harder to do it through the written word versus through the spoken word?

Dan 08:06

Easier to do it, the spoken word, but it takes more effort at the same time. Like, you can really get into nuance, you can unpack things, you can approach it from different angles, you know, you have 1200 words in print for a syndicated column for the length that I do it, to address two or three questions. So you kind of have to pick your battle, you kind of have to focus, you edit the letters so that they're not sprawling and all over the place. The calls you can say, well, there's this angle, and you might use 1200 words before you've even really begun to answer the question.

Amanda 08:40

Yeah, you don't have to be as economical.

Dan 08:41

Right, and that's satisfying in its own way. It's also, as a writer, satisfying to do something pithy and short and sharp and diamond hard, which is kind of what the column feels like.

Amanda 08:49

In the world right now, in 2019, you've been at this for so long, you've encountered so many forms of media, so many different people. You've been through so many arguments and so many moments of galvanization of yourself.

Dan 09:03

I've stepped on so many rakes.

Amanda 09:06

I mean, I don't know what you have to say about that. But what would you say about that?

Dan 09:12

I say thank God for marijuana. And the mute button. And the self discipline not to read your own mentions. There's a balancing act, because you want to be able to take in criticism, because you're not always right about everything. A lot of the things I was wrong about, I've written about how I was wrong about it, and then people throw in your face the thing you wrote 20 years ago, that you were wrong about, and you're like, I've continued to write and think!

Amanda 09:36

Yes, please, please see article X.

Dan 09:40

See the 40 articles I've written since. The example I like to use is asexuality, when that was first sort of floated as a concept, I was like, what is this? I don't get it, and this claim to oppression, I don't understand it. People began to write to me, and I began to speak with people like David Jay, who founded the [Asexuality Visibility Network](#), and continued to process it. But all I ever get thrown in my face is my initial reaction, like what the fuck? And it's like, well, I continued to write and think about it. And so much of dishonest malicious virtue-signaling posturing lefty Twitter seems to boil down to fuck you, listen, do better. And then you listen and do better, and it's fuck you.

Amanda 10:19

I can relate to this a lot.

Dan 10:20

I know. You can't tune out all the critics because you're not always right about everything. So you have to learn how to weed out the critics, so that you take in the honest ones, and you disregard the...

Amanda 10:31

The toxic ones.

Dan 10:32

The toxic ones, sometimes the toxic one and the honest one are making basically the same point, but their motivations are very different. And if you find critics with good motivations, I think you should listen to them, and I try to, and I do, and that's the difficult line to walk.

Amanda 10:46

Strangely, sometimes even those toxic packages can have handy little pieces of truth in them. You just need to be able to have a heavy gas mask on, to go in there and take out the little seed of truth in what they're saying.

Dan 11:01

And you can't get sucked into an interaction with a toxic person, even if they have a valid point.

Amanda 11:05

No, cos you'll lose.

Dan 11:06

I will listen to somebody who I think might be toxic, and hear what they have to say, but I won't interact with them, because then you just get dragged down into the muck. And there's too much pot and cock to smoke and suck in the world to waste all your time arguing with people on Twitter.

Amanda 11:20

I agree! Why waste time on Twitter when you can be getting a perfectly nice blow job, while stoned.

Dan 11:26

Exactly.

Amanda 11:27

One of the things that everyone seems to want to know about, and people always want to know about this, and I don't blame them, because in our culture right now, it's still on the unusual side, is the fact that I'm in an open marriage. It's been open since the beginning. It's gone through, as a good, healthy, open relationship should, many formats and iterations and different sets of rules.

Dan 11:52

Constantly renegotiate it.

Amanda 11:55

So I've been in this relationship with my husband Neil for 10 years. I would love some advice from you.

Dan 12:04

After 20 years in an open relationship, and 24 in that relationship.

Amanda 12:06

So the thing that happens the most often, and this is especially with my friends and family, is they sort of take me aside, or we're on a walk, or there's some intimate moment, and they're just like, how do you do it? Like, how do you guys do it? I just don't get it. Like, I just couldn't do that. But there's often, baked in there, this like, I kind of want what you've got, but I don't even understand how to get my head around the wanting.

I find articulating it difficult, because just laying it out and saying, well, it's really easy, you just have to have a lot of communication, and a lot of compassion, and it'll all just sort itself out, you need to be the kind of person who's willing to honestly look at your own jealousy, and honestly look at your own feelings, and actually talk to your partner, really, about the things that are on your mind, and in your groin, and not just dismiss them, or ignore them, or pretend they aren't there. And I don't think I've convinced anyone in my family to jump off the giant cruise ship of monogamy, into the little fun bohemian sailboat of you actually got to get laid on the side, not with your main partner. Have you found, because you're also in an open marriage, have you found a way of explaining slash describing, setting the stage for someone that actually helps them? Doesn't just prescriptively, pedantically, patronizingly describe this awesome thing that worked for me, but have you found the words to liberate anyone else out of their miserable monogamous relationship?

Nothing, by the way, here's where I get in trouble. Nothing against monogamy, if it works for you, go for it.

Dan 14:00

Right, I was just gonna say, I don't think everyone needs, or should be, needs to be liberated from monogamy, wants to be, or should be. It's just there's a lot of false consciousness in monogamy-land, because it's what people are told they should want, and then people convince themselves that it's what they do want, because that's what good people want, and we all want to be good people. And a lot of people stumble along in monogamy being very bad at it, feeling terrible, like they're failing at monogamy, when the reality is monogamy as a model has failed them, and they need to make a shift. If people are happy being monogamous, relatively happy, and people are only ever relatively happy being non monogamous.

Amanda 14:38

All relationships are hard, PS.

Dan 14:40

Right. And if it works for you, and there's more on the good side of the scales than on the bad side of the scales, and you're content and happy some of the times, and miserable but not so miserable so much of the time you want to get out, then I'm not going to try to talk you out of being monogamous. But for me it's a little different experience because in homo-land, non monogamous relationships are not the exception, they're pretty much the rule in gay homo-land. So it isn't weird among our gay friends, and the gay couples we know, for us to be the non-monogamous ones, because pretty much everybody is the non-monogamous ones in long-term gay male relationships.

Amanda 15:15

Do you chalk that up to just a general consciousness about sexuality and rule breaking that straight people don't have?

Dan 15:24

Yeah, you can't be a gay person if you hadn't already broken the biggest rule. And then everything else is a conversation. Even when I came out, a long ass time ago, more than three decades ago, suddenly monogamy wasn't a default setting, it was a conversation that a couple would have. And the very first gay couples I met were non-monogamous. And then I thought I wanted monogamy at the time, and then I was very bad at it, and eventually realized basically when I said, that the model was failing me, I wasn't failing it. That was the wrong choice for the person that I was, that I am.

Amanda 15:52

So there are people for whom monogamy seems to work, and it's fine. And then there are the people who seem to be stuck, dissatisfied, questioning, curious, and you must have had these people come to you in real life, in your column.

Dan 16:08

Well often those people want to have sex with other people, but they don't want their partner to have sex with other people, which in my experience is the hang up with a lot of people. I can understand why I want to have sex with other people, I can understand that my desire to have sex with other people doesn't mean my partner doesn't love me, and it doesn't mean I'm going to leave my partner, but I'm so insecure about my partner leaving me, or what it might mean for them to want to have sex with other people, that I can't allow it.

Amanda 16:28

What have you found in monogamous palliative care? What have you found...

Dan 16:36

Or monogamous hospice care, when monogamy is dying on a gurney in front of you.

Amanda 16:38

Exactly. What have what have you found, that is actually of use to people?

Dan 16:45

To tell them that it is scary, and that often you don't realize that your fears were unfounded until you're on the other side of the experience.

Amanda 16:54

The fears of...

Dan 16:55

Of what it might mean if your partner slept with other people, someone else, how you might feel, whether they're gonna leave you or not. A lot of those things, you can only know how it's really going to feel, and only know that they're not going to leave you, after they've slept with

somebody else and haven't left you. Oh, and jealousy. Jealousy doesn't disqualify you from being non-monogamous. Like, I'm too jealous a person to ever do that. Well, all non-monogamous couples have to process, and deal with, and handle their partner's jealousy, each other's jealousy. It's one of the ways you demonstrate to your partner that you can be in a monogamous relationship, is how you honor and handle their jealousy. You demonstrate your consideration for their insecurities. You don't have to have no insecurities, or be with someone with no insecurities.

Amanda 17:38

That doesn't exist.

Dan 17:40

That person doesn't exist. Terry, and I have been together almost 25 years, we've both had boyfriends, and there's jealousy. And there are times when you feel like you're not the priority, and you have to say, excuse me, I need to feel like a priority, or the priority, or concurrent priority. And you have to sort of assert yourself in the relationship, and people in long term relationships that are sexually exclusive, and successfully so, often talk about the death of that relationship, or the emotional death of it, even if the relationship doesn't die, is when you begin to take each other for granted. Well that can happen in a non-monogamous relationship too, you can start to take each other for granted. And you have to be on your guard against that, and sometimes you don't realize you're doing that until your non-monogamous partner is clearing his throat and putting his foot down and saying excuse me.

Amanda 18:28

I also wonder if there isn't a fantasy about an open marriage that also doesn't exist, that people in monogamous relationships who have never dabbled in this have.

Dan 18:40

That's sort of like wondering, and imagining, and goes one way, almost all people who are in non-monogamous relationships have been in monogamous ones. Most non-monogamous couples were monogamous for a time at the start of the relationship. Most non-monogamous couples I know pivoted from non-monogamy.

Amanda 18:56

Were you?

Dan 18:57

Yeah, we were monogamous for four years, at Terry's insistence.

Amanda 18:59

Oh, wow. But you weren't excited?

Dan 19:02

I was down, I was fine. Terry's beautiful, and wonderful, and I loved him, and that was what he needed to be in the relationship.

Amanda 19:08

But it's not what you would have preferred.

Dan 19:09

No, and I spoke my truth, I said, non-monogamy is better for me, and I think is healthier, and as gay men, and I wrote about this in one of my books, when we were about to adopt, his rule at that moment was, cheat on me and I'll leave you, it's over, and my attitude and my hesitation was, well, the odds that one or the other of us are going to cheat on each other in a committed monogamous gay male relationship are about 104%. So basically, what we're doing is we're adopting knowing we're going to break up. And that seems...

I didn't want his permission to sleep with other people, I didn't want a pass for cheating, what I wanted was, if one of us cheats, we will work through this, not we will automatically break up. And then in the end, it was Terry that opened the relationship. An opportunity came along and he was like, I'd like to experience that, and I was like, I would love it for you to experience that. Please go experience that. And then he saw, because he did it first, that his feelings for me not only weren't diminished by this experience, they were enhanced by this experience. Because being with me meant he could have me, have stability, have love, have a family and have freedom, adventure variety.

Amanda 20:18

With your knowledge and blessing, which is really an act of love, and a gift.

Dan 20:23

And sometimes ruins it for people. There are people who cheat...

Amanda 20:25

Oh, because they want the danger.

Dan 20:26

They want the danger, they want to lie, they want to sneak around, and that's what makes it exciting for them.

Amanda 20:30

I don't get that, I have never, ever felt that, but I think that's just the way that I'm built. To me, the idea of lying and cheating is so unsexy.

Dan 20:38

Risk and danger excites people, and power excites people. And to have a secret, and to get away with something, is to have power over someone else. If you can understand that that's

what's going on for you, I think you can build that into an ethical non-monogamous relationship. In fact, I have friends who have built that into an ethical, non-monogamous relationship, where the one used to cheat, and they had a lot of crisis around it, and when it was permitted, if he could go and ask for permission, it wasn't fun, it wasn't exciting. He liked being this dirty bird guy who sometimes snuck around and did these disgusting things, it was a part of him that was, pre-coming out, he was sneaking around, having sex with men on the sly, and feeling very conflicted, but very aroused by who he was perceived to be, and who he actually knew himself to be, that dichotomy really turned him on. And so everything being on the up and up was kind of ruining it for him. And I actually kind of helped them craft a solution, which was he can cheat, and he doesn't have to ask permission, tell you in advance, but every six months or so, you guys sit down and...

Amanda 21:40

Make a list?

Dan 21:40

Yeah, so what happened in the last six months? So there are times when he says I'm meeting a friend, or going out to dinner with my parents.

Amanda 21:48

Lies!

Dan 21:48

And it's a lie. And there are times he says I'm going out to dinner with my parents and it's the truth.

Amanda 21:52

It's so theatrical though.

Dan 21:53

It is!

Amanda 21:45

Once you know that, it can't be... It's like well, really dinner with the parents... or going to the dungeon.

Dan 22:00

So he gets to go home, after sneaking out to a dungeon, and his partner is none the wiser, feeling like he put something over on his partner. And then they go to Palm Springs and take MDMA and tell each other everything, and then he built up some new secrets for next time.

MUSIC BREAK - Feeding The Dark

Amanda 22:22

So who initiated the conversation about openness? It's rare, I know this of you, that your relationship with Neil has been open from the start, that's rare.

Amanda 22:32

I didn't know it was rare.

Dan 22:32

I'm just curious, in your relationship, who initiated the conversation about it?

Amanda 22:35

Neil and I were both in relationships when we met each other, but neither of us cheated on the current partner. But we sort of collided, and started sort of regarding each other with interest, when we were in relationships.

Neil had just come out of a very, very long marriage, like a lifelong marriage with three kids. He was in his late 40s, the ink was still pretty wet on the divorce papers when he met me. And he had been gallivanting, quite happily.

I had been very single for a long time, and basically married to a touring rock'n'roll lifestyle. I never slowed down long enough to begin a relationship. I had hit my early 30s without having been in a committed relationship for quite a while. I had had a lot of relationships in my 20s where I was with people, and then broke up with them really quickly. I found myself having a real personal come to Jesus in my early 30s going like, is this really a thing that I need? And why do I think...

Dan 23:53

A relationship?

Amanda 23:54

A relationship. And I kind of know why, I'm not an idiot, I'm media literate, I live in this culture, I am very fucking smart. But really, let me dig down to the core of why I may think I need a relationship writ large to be happy. And I really meditated on that for quite a while. And it's like, is it deep? Is it me? Is it culture? Is it my parents? Is it expectations? Is it real? In many, many, many respects, I was incredibly happy in my life. My artwork was really nurturing my fan base, my traveling, my artistic friendships, my occasional sex dalliances with whoever. I just didn't feel anything missing. I also didn't feel a child missing. I didn't feel anything missing. I was just super fucking happy.

And I thought, maybe I really don't need an other. Especially some dude to marry. I certainly don't need the cultural prescription. And like clockwork, and like Hollywood, as soon as I really had that final conclusive thought that I didn't need an other to be happy, I fell madly, deeply in love with a super hot, six foot tall theatre director, who checked every box, and went for it.

Dan 25:19

It's exhausting how all the cliches inevitably apply. The minute you stop looking, you'll find something.

Amanda 25:22

Of course.

Dan 25:23

And in a way, you kind of stopped looking, and then...

Amanda 25:26

Yeah, and I hadn't really been looking, but I'd been considering.

Dan 25:27

You stopped wanting, or you stopped assuming you might want, should want...?

Amanda 25:30

So I started dating this very, very hot theater director, who I was madly in love with, but we were not compatible. The passion was massive. And the issues came up fast and furious right after the initial moment of passion.

Dan 25:44

What was the fundamental incompatibility?

Amanda 25:46

Well, first of all, he wanted a monogamous relationship. And he and I, I think, just had very different ideas about how to be a couple. Time, energy, dependency, all of those things, didn't appear until we had been together for a while, and then I went on the road, and it just crashed and burned, ugly and hard, as soon as we were apart, and trying to maintain a long distance situation.

Right around that moment, Neil pulled up his chair and was like, hey! I'm really nice, I wouldn't mind going out on a date with you, and I was like, oh man, don't even, I'm in the middle of a serious situation here. You're very nice, you're also sort of like, you're weird, you're British, you're older than me, you're not really my type.

I often think that I have that ex-boyfriend to thank, deeply, because I was so upset at the time about the monogamy, and the problems, that Neil came in and looked like a really attractive alternative, because before even dating, we had a conversation about some theoretical relationship that we might be in, and monogamy came up. And I was in the middle of my breakup with the ex, and Neil said something offhandedly in a conversation like, well, you know, we could be an open relationship, and I was like, really? That sounds nice.

Dan 27:17

I think the interesting thing that you mentioned is you met this person who ticked all the boxes.

Amanda 27:21

Except that box.

Dan 27:22

Except that box, but you had to figure that out. And then along comes someone who didn't tick...

Amanda 27:27

Any of the boxes!

Dan 27:27

And of the boxes. So many people stay in relationships that aren't good for them, or right for them, because on paper, they're convinced themselves this oughta work. Isn't this what I thought I wanted? And then in the relationship, maybe what you thought you wanted isn't what you wanted. And maybe there's some more sort of ephemeral things that are actually what you want, and the boxes are the errata and the ephemera that aren't.

Amanda 27:51

I mean, Neil and I are both incredibly creative, imaginative people, and we also both started to draw new boxes. We created and imagined a new way of relationshiping into being, to accommodate the other. Because we really weren't one another's types, in a way that was almost comical.

Neil had a type, I was not fucking it. And I had a type and Neil, wasn't it. There were some big fundamentals, that I think we recognized in one another, that were deeper boxes to tick, beyond the superficial types and attractions and sexual predilections or whatever.

Dan 28:37

Shared life goals.

Amanda 28:39

Yeah, shared life goals, and a deep interest in one another. We found each other really interesting. The more and more I look at people's relationships, and what tethers them to one another over lengths of time, that seems to be the common denominator. A respect for the other, and a deep interest in the other, and I think Neil and I had that, and that, through all of our trials and tribulations, has kept us sustaining.

I mean, we had the monogamy conversation I think before we even started dating, we had both mentioned that it was a non starter, kind of a non negotiable, like, not into monogamy. And it was part of the attraction.

Dan 29:27

And it was a reaction in part, for you, because you were in a relationship with someone who wanted monogamy, and that was a point of friction.

Amanda 29:32

Yeah, and I think Neil had also had his own problems with monogamy in the past, and so that led us to, you know, we saw freedom in one another.

Dan 29:42

I always say that, I look at Terry, and he's why I can. That said, you know, I'm not a non-monogamous supremacist. There are advantages to monogamy for people who value it, and for whom monogamy works. It provides some people with a form of emotional security that they wouldn't experience in a non-monogamous relationship. paternal security for a lot of people. It makes people feel prioritised maybe, or they're not good at sharing, or whatever else it is, there are advantages to monogamy at the same time.

Amanda 30:14

Well, monogamy can be simpler.

Dan 30:17

Yes. Because monogamy is one thing.

Amanda 30:19

Yeah, it doesn't have many, many shades.

Dan 30:22

Right, and if you decide to be in a non-monogamous relationship, that takes so many different forms, it can be open, it can be poly, it can be Don't Ask Don't Tell, it can be all cards on the table, it can be not in our house, not in our time zone, not in our bed, no one we know, no one from our social circle, you can put so many limits on it that it becomes a kind of default monogamous commitment.

Amanda 30:41

Well, yes, and Neil and I have a lot of these. We've got rules!

Dan 30:45

Yeah, the rules, everybody's got rules. You know, monogamous people have one rule, and non-monogamous people have hundreds potentially, in their relationship, to make each other feel like you're the primary partner, to make each other feel emotionally secure and prioritized. And those are important, but those are constantly being negotiated.

Amanda 31:02

And they must be, or it gets stale.

Dan 31:03

And they must be. There are things that are allowed in my relationship now that weren't allowed when we first became non-monogamous, as we became more comfortable with it. And more comfortable also with this thing that I think sometimes a lot of the non-monogamous people I see don't really recognize, which is that third person is a person.

Amanda 31:25

Totally.

Dan 31:26

With feelings, needs...

Amanda 31:27

Feelings, needs, and need for respect and consideration.

Dan 31:32

And care. And there's a moral obligation you might have to that person as an intimate. And you might have a moral obligation to that person who is your partner's sex partner, even if they're not also yours.

Terry had somebody he was seeing who injured himself, didn't have family here, was a performer, didn't have family here, and didn't have health insurance, and couldn't get around for a little bit, and so moved into our guest room so we could look after him. Some people, you know, who knew us and knew what was going on, were shocked and we're just like, well, we've gotten to know them, they're a human being.

MUSIC BREAK - Intermission Is Relative

Amanda 32:17

Did the rules around intimacy shift when said broken person moved into your house?

Dan 32:19

Yeah, that was about the time the rules around intimacy began to shift.

Amanda 32:23

Did you feel okay with Terry fooling around with that person under the roof of your house?

Dan 32:28

Yeah, I did. We had never had a not under the roof rule. We had a, we have a child under this roof and we're not gonna... Here's a 45 year old pop culture reference for the kids. We don't want any Kramer versus Kramer moments, where the kid comes out of their bedroom and

there's a strange naked adult walking down the hallway. So logistically, it was very rare for somebody else to be in our house. If our son was away, on a sleepover or our son was at grandma's house, then maybe we could do that, but we didn't just have strange men. And we never had strange men, we were lesbians. We had a lesbian friend once, asked us how we make our non-monogamous relationship work, and we described it and she was like, oh my god, the two of you together are one lesbian. Because we called them very special guest stars. We'd have one guy we were kind of messing around with, who we would get to know, and really like, and wanna have them around, and they'd be at our house for Christmas.

Amanda 33:20

Feelings!

Dan 33:20

Yeah, we had feelings, and we're still that way. And I think that's something a lot of non-monogamous people don't do, and I have a problem with that. People aren't tube socks, people aren't Fleshlights, people aren't Kleenexes.

Amanda 33:33

Yeah, this is the compartmentalization that is part of the overarching problem, the compartmentalization of feelings and sex, that they don't go together.

Dan 33:43

Yeah, I've never been able to jack off inside someone. Gay men are particularly good at that. And we've gotten in trouble. We had a three way with this guy, and it was pouring rain out, and his boyfriend knew he was having a three way with us, and his boyfriend was having a two way with somebody else, they're in an open relationship. But it was pouring rain, and he couldn't go home, because his boyfriend was still having this assignation. And so we all hung out in bed and watched the Great British Bake Off. And it was very chill, and just mellow, and we had some ice cream, and his boyfriend was really upset. Not that he'd had sex with us.

Amanda 34:16

Cos that's more intimate.

Dan 34:17

Because we were intimate.

Amanda 34:18

Yeah, you really have to think about these things. What is the imagined threat? What is a real threat? What sort of thoughts do you have that could possibly, that you could literally imagine being threatening to your partner?

Dan 34:35

Sometimes the answer is on the other side of your fears, and the only way to get to the other side is to experience the thing you fear. And we were talking about just your partner having sex with someone else. Well, what about your partner saying I love you to somebody else in a romantic sense?

Amanda 34:46

Or your partner picking up somebody else from the hospital?

Dan 34:50

That kind of intimacy, I'm on the other side of that. I've heard Terry say love you to somebody else, in a romantic and sexual sense, and it doesn't scare me any more, because I'm on the other side of it. It scared me very much before it happened. On the other side of it, it's like okay, maybe we're poly now, in some ways I don't like identifying as poly. Open is you're allowed to have sex with other people under mutually agreed to circumstances, and with conditions. Poly, there's also a mutually agreed to, there's also conditions, but poly means you can have concurrent romantic, often concurrent committed romantic relationships with more than one partner.

And there's all sorts of different forms poly can take. There's hierarchical poly, where there's the couple, and then they have secondary and tertiary partners. There's an equal poly, where there's three people who are all partners to each other, even if it's a poly V, where there's one person who has sex with this person, sex with that person. And those two people don't have sex with each other. They're still in the relationship together. It's complicated. And some people are kind of poly on steroids where they have so many relationships that they can't possibly devote any decent amount of time to any one person they're in a relationship with. I've sometimes seen people who are so poly that it looks like avoidance of intimacy and commitment. Terry and I have both been, are, in love with other people, and still in love with each other. So I guess we're technically poly.

Amanda 36:10

How long have you been in this relationship with Terry?

Dan 36:12

24 years.

Amanda 36:13

And have you seen an obvious, indirectly or directly proportionate, allowance for love and experimentation? Because once you're in a fucking relationship for 24 years, how threatened can you be, if you've really been working at it?

Dan 36:33

You can get pretty threatened. Jealousy is still a thing, and threats are still a thing.

Amanda 36:38

But do you still ever feel an existential threat to your relationship at this point?

Dan 36:42

Of course.

Amanda 36:43

Really?

Dan 36:43

Yeah, certainly at times. I don't want to whistle past the world's most densely populated graveyard, which is we could never possibly break up, we're so in love, nothing could ever destroy our relationship. People grow apart. circumstances change, sometimes people surprise you. What they want, or what they want changes, and maybe it's not you anymore. So I don't want to say that nothing could ever possibly break us up. I'm 54, he's 48, our son is an adult now, and lives on his own. Most similarly situated couples, together a quarter of a century, fully grown adult children, are sort of coasting along, waiting to die. And we have so much to process and talk about. Sometimes even when we have a conflict about his relationship with someone else, or mine with somebody else, or ours with someone, and we're having to have a knock down, drag out fight, we will step out of the fight for a second, just to look at each other and say, at least we're not bored.

Amanda 37:40

Oh, yeah.

MUSIC BREAK - You Keep Starving Your Heart

Amanda 37:47

There was a moment in our open relationship that surprised me, and I allowed for it, when I became pregnant, and knew I was going to keep a child, and was committed to pregnancy, childbirth, being a mother. And I had gone through a really interesting slog to get there in the first place, including not being sure, and having an abortion. And I found myself thinking, I don't want Neil fucking anyone else, and it feels biological. It's also intellectual. I'm pregnant with his child! This is not a good time for him to be having sex with another female mammal.

Dan 38:29

The stakes are higher, you're more vulnerable.

Amanda 38:31

I felt incredibly vulnerable. Props to him, he honored my need. I went to him and I said, listen, let's wrap this up for a moment. Let's not predict the future. But let's close the door to our house, while I have this baby. I'm not demanding. I'm asking, will you do this for me? Because I feel like I need it. And he did.

Luckily, having an infant is very preoccupying, so I don't think neither of us were feeling very sexy while just dealing with a newborn infant. It took a while, I can't even remember if it was months or years, but it took quite a while for us to even broach the, what do we do about our open relationship, and also a child is like, your relationship becomes a triangle. You've had a child, you understand what that means, it's like all of a sudden, you're not just two swinging adults, you're a family.

Dan 39:26

You gotta triangulate. You're in a relay race, with the baton being passed off constantly.

Amanda 39:30

What have you seen in the open relationship department, when kids arrived, and pregnancy arrived?

Dan 39:37

Well, my own personal experience, it was shortly after we had a child that we opened the relationship, and it wasn't possible for us to have as much sex with other people as we might have wanted to, because logistically, we had to prioritize the kid at all times. For the first decade and change that we were in an open relationship, it was because the kid was at Grandma's for a week, and we were in Amsterdam, and moments like that, or the kid was away for the weekend with friends, and we could be gay men for five minutes. But I've seen a lot of people who've closed up relationships that were open, because they needed to feel that security, and prioritizing, and because I think sometimes there's a biological terror that sets in around abandonment when you're vulnerable. You're an animal, and vulnerable in a way after you have an infant...

Amanda 40:25

You are literally vulnerable, I mean, it's never great if your partner accidentally gets someone else pregnant, but it's especially not great if you've just had a child. It gets real confusing.

Dan 40:34

You know, I think that can be an important way to demonstrate to each other that you can be in an open relationship, that you are able to honor your partner's request to close the relationship on a case by case need basis. It would be optimal if monogamous people could open their relationships occasionally. And sometimes people have, and sometimes people I've given advice to have. I always remember this letter from this woman who was in conflict with her husband for 20 years because her husband was kinky and wanted to do bondage and S&M as a sub, and she would do these things with him, and tie him up, and dress up for him, and not into it, but didn't want him to have an erotic experience with someone else, so was doing this thing with him that made her miserable, not constantly, but once in a while.

Amanda 41:22

And I can't imagine he was really getting off on it because when someone's not into it, it's a kind of a bummer.

Dan 41:26

Yeah, when someone sucks your dick like they would rather eat shit, it's no fun to get your dick sucked, right? It's that birthday on your blowjob once a year, but I'm going to do it really badly, so that next year you won't ask, or even want it.

Amanda 41:39

And if you're uncomfortably holding a whip, wearing latex, looking very sad, it's just not hot.

Dan 41:44

And something about the letter convinced me that they had the money, and it wasn't gonna be impoverished, it's just like, let him go see a dominatrix. Let him go see someone who loves this gig and is good at it, and then that might take a little searching to find someone who loves to be in the latex and hold the whip.

If you hated mowing the lawn, you would outsource that shit. He wants to have this erotic power exchange experience, you hate it, let him do it with somebody else. And she wrote back in like two years later to let me know that she let him do it with somebody else, it was wonderful, it saved their relationship. They were having more vanilla sex.

Amanda 42:19

It probably improved their... Yeah.

Dan 42:20

Because he wasn't stewing in resentment, and she wasn't stewing in resentment, and he was grateful to her, that there was now this allowance for him to get this need met outside, which made him more attentive to her needs, that in the past he'd been neglectful of, because resentment made him feel like, well, my needs aren't being met, why should I be so conscious and dutiful about your needs, and it improved their relationship that there was this case by case exception, an allowance made, for opening the relationship, in the same way you guys made this exception for closing it.

Amanda 42:48

I don't know if you know, but I was a pro dom for six months after a period of being a stripper in my 20s. I loved it. I mean, I was one of those dominatrixes who was just like, this is fun! And I'm making so much money! I was a little too young to not be a little messy and stupid about it, but I was lucky, and never got into any scrapes.

There is something very convenient, when your partner's needs don't fall under your wheelhouse, and they can just go pay a professional. That isn't always true. There is something

nice and tidy about, my husband's got a fetish, and it's an it's an hour, and it's 500 bucks, and it's in and it's out. And that person doesn't really have any emotional needs, and that person isn't going to come in and threaten and tangle with my marriage. It gets more dangerous when there is a third human being with feelings, potential attachments, needs, craziness.

Dan 43:53

The old joke about, you pay a sex worker, not for the sex, you pay the sex worker to go away after the sex. And so that is sort of walled off, and less of a threat potentially, than having an interaction with somebody where there is seduction, or attraction, some co-worker or someone. Allowing for that, allowing for your partner in a monogamous relationship to have an out, or a pass, for someone that they could connect with in a way that might threaten the relationship, is scarier for people in monogamous relationships.

MUSIC BREAK – You'd Think I'd Shot Their Children

Amanda 44:30

So, a lot of people I know who come to me wanting counsel or advice about open relationships don't know how to broach the subject with their partner without fucking up the relationship. And what do you usually advise people in that department?

Dan 44:51

Well, I'd like to advise them at the beginning of the relationship, to have a conversation, not about, I'm not a non-monogamy proselytizing douchebag, but to have a conversation at the beginning of the relationship, just to acknowledge that of course you're attracted to other people, of course, I'm attracted to other people. We don't have to endlessly police each other for evidence of what we should just accept to be true. We're in a monogamous relationship, so we're not going to act on it, and we're both considerate of each other's feelings, so we're not going to be cruel about it. If you catch me suddenly checking out the barista's ass, maybe don't blow up at me. If I'm drooling over the barista, or making an ass out of myself, or hitting on people in front of you...

Amanda 45:33

Touching the barista's ass.

Dan 45:33

Or touching the barista's ass, then I'm an inconsiderate fucking clod, and you have a right to be angry. And if you can just acknowledge at the start that you're attracted to other people, I'm attracted to other people, so much angst and drama and conflict in relationships is you want to have sex with that person, you have a crush on that person at work, and you should be able to say...

Amanda 45:52

Which means you don't want me...

Dan 45:53

Right, because that's the lie we're told, that being in love means you don't want to have sex with anybody else, which would mean we don't have to make monogamous commitments.

Amanda 46:00

It would just work.

Dan 46:01

We would just be monogamous, and we wouldn't have to threaten people with death to be monogamous, if we were a pair-bonding species and monogamy came naturally to us. Monogamy is something that we do, and if monogamous people, people who want to be monogamous, can accept imperfection, meaning sometimes you're attracted to other people, sometimes I'm attracted to other people, that doesn't mean we don't love each other, that doesn't mean we're not committed to each other. Sometimes you might fuck up. Sometimes there might come a time when I fuck up.

As I've frequently said, like to say, monogamy is the only thing humans do where perfection is the only measure for success, the only standard for success. You can be Shaun White, world's greatest snowboarder, fall the fuck down, get up, and still be Shaun White, the world's greatest snowboarder. If you're monogamous for 50 years, and you cheated once, you were terrible at monogamy, you've never loved your partner, you were a shitty human being, the relationship was a lie. What else do we say that about? World's greatest chef, burnt an omelette, not world's greatest chef anymore. Of course people fail at that.

And if we define cheating as a relationship extinction level event, and as evidence that you were never loved, we are setting up every relationship, not non-monogamous relationship for failure, every monogamous relationship for failure. So me saying these things isn't trying to talk people out of being monogamous, I'm trying to disable the ticking time bomb that so many monogamous people insist on placing at the heart of their monogamous relationship. Where's the allowance for human frailty? Where's the allowance for desire?

Amanda 47:33

We just have desire all the time, as mammals, and it comes very, very naturally to us. The thing that makes us wonderful as human beings is our insane imaginations.

Dan 47:49

God, I mentioned the barista's ass earlier because I encountered a barista with a spectacular ass this morning.

Amanda 47:56

That ass is still right there!

Dan 47:58

And if only I could tell you what I was imagining about it, burn the microphone.

Amanda 48:02

But yeah, I mean, this also smacks right into our weird Puritan culture of this other insanity, that we aren't filled with constant imaginative desire, and that that desire is somehow bad, and should be punished.

Dan 48:19

The people who made those rules, to make all of us feel bad about that constant imaginative desire, were themselves...

Amanda 48:27

Full of it.

Dan 48:28

Full of it, and so they were...

Amanda 48:30

On every level!

Dan 48:30

On every level, so there isn't a case where, whoever wrote those rules was externalizing their own internal conflict. And you see that everywhere you look.

Amanda 48:38

I feel this thing and it is bad.

Dan 48:40

Right, and so I'm going to tell you that you're bad on the assumption that you must be feeling those things, while pretending I don't feel those things, because I'm a good person, and you're a terrible person, but I'm actually a bad person, that's why I came up with these rules, because it's actually about controlling myself, and dominating you.

MUSIC BREAK - Scarlet and Gold

Amanda 49:04

How have human beings been around for this long, and gotten it this wrong? That's my question lately. I'm just looking around at everything, from sex, to the abortion politics, to war, and I'm just like, we've been around the rules. We've been around for so long, we've had so much time to practice, evolve, and hone. Why are we doing this to each other?

Dan 49:34

Religion, tribalism, the enlightenment didn't come along until relatively recently, the scientific method didn't come along until relatively recently.

Amanda 49:44

Save us, Dan Savage!

Dan 49:44

We didn't start studying human sexuality in a serious way until the last 50 years, less if you want to count women as humans, were we studying sexuality.

Amanda 49:53

We're getting there. We're getting there, we're just starting.

Dan 49:54

We're getting there, we only just figured out what a giant fucking Death Star the clitoris is, like five minutes ago. It's gonna take a long time to unpack. And we're nervous and scared. We're mammals from the savannah, who are being chased out and eaten by everything, and we're naturally a little bit flinchy and twitchy and superstitious. And sex is scary.

The lie we're told when we're children is that we will grow up one day and have sex. The reality is we will grow up one day and sex will have us, and it has its own purposes. Sex is a half a billion years old, or 500 million years, old sexual reproduction. It built us, it's gonna build whatever comes after us, and it has no use for us. We are an accident of sexual reproduction, and humans, because of our capacity for abstract thought, because of speech, we have this very complicated society, right? Human culture is endlessly complicated. Well, human sex cultures are endlessly complicated.

For the same reason there are so many options for dinner, and nobody goes, well, that's weird, why don't we just eat like squirrels? But people will go, well that's weird that you want to fuck that way, why don't you just fuck normally, like a squirrel? You don't see squirrels with whips and fishnet stockings, why are you doing that? Well, because the same reason I'm eating out in different types of restaurants all the time, or have a big passion for Thai food, or whatever the fuck it is. And nobody pathologises that, because there's no orgasms or boners attached to it.

The minute you attach orgasms and boners to anything, everybody has a problem with it, because sex scares us all. And I think that's not just a product of religion, I think that's partly a product of our extended adolescence. Most mammals reach sexual maturity pretty rapidly, and it takes us a decade and change to get there, and in that decade and change, we become fully aware of what sex is, before we have any interest, usually. Some people have atypical experiences. But before we have any interest in actually doing it ourselves, you remember finding out where babies come from, and what adults do, and you were like, gross! And I'm

never gonna do that, and my parents are disgusting and blah, blah, blah. And then you hit puberty, and it's like, you're being reeled in, and you didn't want to be a part of this, and I think there's some fingernail scrapes on the floor for everybody, where sex is a little bit scary. And sex can kill you, and intimate partner violence can kill you, picking the wrong sex partner can be a real problem, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections.

Sex is scary, and so our relationship with it is always going to be complicated by the terror of not just the batshit that can happen to you, but the existential dread of knowing that sex...

Amanda 52:40

This was so good, and now it's so depressing!

Dan 52:43

Sex is more important than we are. And there will still be things fucking on this planet long after we have fucked ourselves off this.

Amanda 52:51

Yeah. I do this whole long story in the second act of my show, about going through a miscarriage, alone, having gone through natural childbirth, and not wanting to go to the hospital, not wanting to deal with the doctors, not wanting to deal with being strapped down, not wanting my autonomy taken away, but also being very scared. Having a miscarriage, going through labor, and doing all that alone, is terrifying.

I also know that I came equipped with the ability to do it. And this is what they don't teach you, in health class, in middle school. They teach you scary things, like you're going to bleed, you're going to need tampons, you are going to have sex eventually, you're gonna need birth control, you can get pregnant. They don't teach you that you come emotionally equipped to deal with certain things. They don't teach you that you're going to have the emotional fortitude to deal with an abortion. They don't teach you that you've actually come equipped to deal with a miscarriage, alone if necessary, and be okay. There are just all these things that get completely left out of the story. All of which are real.

Dan 54:01

Pleasure gets left out of the story too, when we're miseducating children about sex. We're so worried...

Amanda 54:06

Yeah, that you're gonna have sex, and you're gonna love it.

Dan 54:09

And it's gonna feel, unless you're asexual, in which case, don't worry about, 1% of the population. That pleasure is why people have sex. It's how sex calms us into doing it.

Amanda 54:19

I can't wait to see your TED Talk about how sex controls the planet.

Dan 54:24

Well, it controls us. I find it fascinating. Sex rules the planet, sex rules us, we negotiate the terms of our surrender with sex, we are not in charge.

Amanda 54:35

Is this something that you've come to gradually, over years and years of being Dan Savage, sex columnist, or is this something that occurred to you really early on?

Dan 54:43

It occurred to me really early on. I mean, I hit puberty and I was gay, and I didn't want to be gay. And I was like, oh, well, this is fucked up, I don't have any choice here? And I didn't. And I realized that I could roll with the hand I was dealt, or I could try to fight it, and there was literally no fighting it, it's physiological, and reptile brain stem shit, and you're not in charge of it, and it's conceited to pretend that you are. Anybody who tells you that they're in charge usually isn't.

Amanda 55:14

I don't feel like I'm in charge. But it is a sweet surrender.

Dan 55:19

I mean, you have to channel it. I don't think that anybody should just do anything that they want to do. Some people sexual desires would be hugely problematic for others, and potentially traumatizing. Which is not to say that people who have fantasies involving violence can't find an outlet, through fantasy or through consensual play with others, they can, but you have to dig a trench that allows your sexuality the freedom to roll to the sea. If you don't dig that canal, you don't direct it, if you dam it up, it's gonna wash everything away when it breaks.

Amanda 55:50

Above all, you must be considerate. You need to consider the other, and then the other other, and consider everybody. Do no harm.

Dan 55:59

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, it's just in my world there's as more doing unto as possible, and more things I want done unto me.

Amanda 56:16

This has been the Art of Asking Everything podcast, I'm Amanda Palmer. Thank you so much to my guest, Dan Savage. You should listen to his podcast, it's called the [Savage Lovecast](#), all the

links are in my shownotes, and you should also check out his writing. Many, many years of it at thestranger.com where it's beautifully organised.

Our engineer was Ben Kersten, at Clatter and Din studios in Seattle.

For all the music you heard in this podcast, you can go to the new and improved amandapalmer.net/podcast

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Thank you so much everyone. Signing off, this is Amanda Fucking Palmer. Keep on asking everything.