

The New Monogamy

by Tammy Nelson

How Far Should We Go?

If there's anything fundamental to the meaning of marriage in Western society, it's monogamy. In fact, monogamy may be the *only* thing that remains essential to most people's idea of marriage. People no longer marry for economic, dynastic, or procreative reasons, as they did for millennia; they can't be compelled to marry by law, religion, or custom; they don't need to marry to have sex or cohabit or even produce and raise children. But throughout all of this staggering change, the requirement and expectation of monogamy as the emotional glue that keeps the whole structure of marriage from collapsing under its own weight has remained constant.

Given the almost universal public denunciation and disapproval of infidelity (which doesn't exclude the barely hidden *schadenfreude* at the deliciously scandalous goings-on of celebrities, famous preachers, major political figures, sports heroes, or even your office coworker caught in flagrante), you'd think that infidelity must be quite rare. At least *nice* people don't do it—
we
wouldn't do it.

Except that we would and we do—much more than most people seem to realize. As a culture committed, in theory, to monogamy, our actions tell a different story. It isn't just that, as therapists, we need to understand that infidelity happens—we all know that already. What some of us may not realize is how *often* it happens. Research varies, but according to some surveys, such as those reported by Joan Atwood and Limor Schwartz in the 2002 *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 55 percent of married women and 65 percent of married men report being unfaithful at some point in their marriage. Up to one-half of married women have at least one lover after they're married and before the age of 40.

If these surveys are correct, the high incidence of infidelity isn't because we live in a particularly licentious, amoral age—the public jeremiads of religious scolds notwithstanding. According to noted anthropologist and researcher Helen Fisher, extramarital affairs have always happened at this high rate, but only now are we getting a more accurate, statistically

informed, picture of what's going on. Fisher also reports that what you might call this "state of affairs" holds true across at least five other cultures worldwide that she's studied.

Within our profession, virtually all couples therapists, whatever their model—psychodynamic, systems, behavioral, insight-oriented, solution-focused—have believed since the field's earliest days that no troubled marriage can recover as long as there's a "third party" hovering in the wings. Ongoing infidelity, however defined—sexual, emotional, physical, "cyber"—is, for most therapists, an automatic deal-breaker to meaningful therapy, not to mention clinical improvement in the marriage.

One major impediment to the view that an affair indicates that something is profoundly wrong in the marriage, however, is that 35 to 55 percent of people having affairs report they were happy in their marriage at the time of their infidelity. They also report good sex and rewarding family lives. So how can we continue viewing affairs as symptoms of dysfunctional marriages when apparently so many of them seem to happen to otherwise "normal," even happy couples? The one-size-fits-all view of infidelity never questions the standard model of monogamy, much less helps a couple explore a *new* model of monogamy that might work better for them and their own particular marriage. Furthermore, a therapist who takes sides, implicitly vilifying one partner as "bad," endorsing the other as "good," is much likelier to lose the couple early on, since infidelity is rarely a black-and-white issue.

What's So Great about Monogamy?

A bigger obstacle to our ability to help couples in the wake of an affair is that, too often, we couples therapists—the keepers of the flame of marriage, so to speak—assume we actually understand what monogamy means in a given relationship. For many decades, the old idea—an exclusive sexual and romantic connection with one person throughout the life of the marriage—has comprised our default definition of it, even though we often fudge a bit about the acceptability of outside opposite-gender friendships, work flirtations, and porn use (as long as it doesn't cross some undefined line into "addiction"), and condone a certain amount of open grazing in fantasy life.

But if the stories we hear from couples coming into our offices these days are any indication, we're in for a sea change. Whether we like it or not, many couples are far less encumbered

with the legal, moral, and social strictures and expectations around marriage that held sway for our parents or even for us, if we were married 20 to 30 or more years ago. With divorce rates hovering at 50 percent, couples today are extremely aware of the impermanence of marriage in our culture and the many centrifugal forces in society pulling it apart. Once past the first, dewy, romantic days as newlyweds, many couples seem to *expect* that infidelity, however defined, is likelier than not. But far from becoming jaded and cynical about their own marriages, they want to protect their relationship—in ways that may surprise or even shock some of us. Instead of wanting to trade in the old partner for the new person, they reject the assumption that, somehow, the second time around, love will be "real," and they'll never again be tempted to stray.

Today's couples are far likelier to think about negotiating ahead of time what they mean by "fidelity" and how they define and live monogamy in their own relationship.

It isn't that there's an epidemic of mate-swapping libertines out of *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*, the iconographic '60s take on the theme. In fact, most couples practicing what I call the "new monogamy" still want and desire a *committed monogamous* marriage, with the same long-term loving attachment, affection, mutual trust, and security that traditional monogamy has always promised—if not always delivered. It's just that their notions about what constitutes emotional and sexual "commitment," "fidelity," and "monogamy" itself are more expansive and varied than what we've long considered the norm.

So what do we mean by this many-splendored "new monogamy," and how does it compare with the old? The new monogamy is, baldly speaking, the recognition that, for an increasing number of couples, marital attachment involves a more fluid idea of connection to the primary partner than is true of the "old monogamy." Within the new notion of monogamy, each partner assumes that the other is, and will remain, the main attachment, but that outside attachments of one kind or another are allowed—as long as they don't threaten the primary connection.

The key to these arrangements, and what makes them meaningful within the framework of emotional commitment, is that *there can be no secrecy between partners about the arrangements*. The fidelity resides in the fact that these couples work out *openly and together* what will be and will not be allowed in their relationships with Party C, and maybe Parties D, E, and F. To couples engaged in the new monogamy, it isn't the outside sexual relationships themselves, but the

attendant secrets, lies, denial, silences, and hidden rendezvous that make them so destructive to the marriage. Rightly or wrongly, today, many couples consider that honesty and openness cleanse affairs, rendering them essentially harmless.

But how does this actually work in practice? Does "being honest" solve all the problems arising when an outside person is brought inside the marriage? Are these couples just kidding themselves, while trying to have their cake and eat it, too?

The Monogamy Contract

Partners who define themselves as a couple (as opposed to two people who happen to hook up now and then, or who engage in what are understood to be short-term affairs, or "friends with benefits," as they're sometimes called) inevitably come to some kind of contract about monogamy—explicit, implicit, or both—whether they fully realize it or not.

The *explicit* monogamy agreement is what's said or committed to out loud by both and defines the partnership's overt rules, which usually forbid outside sexual and/or romantic involvements until death—of one party or the marriage itself. An explicit monogamy agreement can be a marriage vow that generally assumes and sometimes articulates both a personal and legal vow: we pledge our troth to *one* other person, not to one other person and whomever else we might individually fancy over the years.

We generally take this explicit contract very seriously, regardless of whether we break it at some point—we *believe* in it, even if we don't necessarily *maintain* it. In several polls researching adultery in different cultures around the world, reported by Pamela Druckerman in *Lust in Translation:*

Infidelity from Tokyo to Tennessee,

more than 80 percent of respondents indicated they thought infidelity was wrong. Of those who admitted to having been caught cheating, a majority said they didn't think of themselves as the "cheating kind." Apparently, even when we're committing infidelity, we don't like to think of ourselves as the kind of people who'd commit infidelity. In that wonderful capacity for double-think so characteristic of our species, we can be unfaithful while believing quite sincerely that unfaithful is what other people are. When we make an explicit vow to be monogamous, we fully intend to keep it, even though many of us don't.

However, the *implicit* monogamy agreement or understanding between the couple is different from the spoken, explicit monogamy agreement and may never be discussed at all. Often based on cultural mores, religious beliefs (or lack thereof), traditional sex roles, family background, and personal moral values, the implicit agreement may never be openly visited before the commitment ceremony, or even after. Indeed, each partner may hold a different, even opposing, understanding of what the agreement is, and different expectations about the commitment each has made. For example, implicit monogamy agreements include, "We promise to be faithful until one of us grows tired of the other," or "I know you won't cheat, but I probably will," or (traditionally a woman's vow) "I'll be faithful, but you won't because you're a guy," or "We'll be faithful except for a little swinging when we go on vacation."

Often a sudden collision between each partner's implicit contract precipitates a marital crisis. For example, Ryan and Tina were in therapy with me for an affair that Tina was having with a neighbor. Ryan was devastated by Tina's affair, even though he himself admitted to six or seven of his own sexual "dalliances" with women throughout the years of their marriage. His wife had known about his affairs and put up with them, assuming that "that's what men do." What shocked Ryan was, first, that *Tina* was having an affair—the implicit rule was that he could, but she couldn't. Even more shocking was that her affair was no dalliance. "Tina fell in love with this guy," Ryan wailed. "I never loved the women I slept with; they were just for sex. I never thought anything like this would ever happen!"

In Ryan's mind, his implicit monogamy agreement was that *his* affairs were acceptable as long as there was no emotional connection. That *she* should have an affair and, worst betrayal of all, actually fall in love, had no place in what he thought was their agreement. In these cases, the most useful focus of therapy is on the discovery and disclosure of the unspoken, implicit rules that cover each spouse's behavior and attitudes toward fidelity. If a husband believes that it's OK for him to chat online with other women, perhaps using a webcam to have sexual experiences with them over the Internet, is it also OK for his wife to do the same? If the wife has a strong emotional connection to a male friend and texts and e-mails him all day long, sharing her most intimate feelings and desires, is it alright for her husband to have the same type of relationship with a woman friend?

In the therapy with Ryan and Tina, we worked on exposing the implicit expectations that both had of the relationship and what monogamy meant to them. We dug into what each of their

parents had believed about relationships and marriage. It was interesting that Tina's mother had had an affair when Tina was young, which no one ever talked about—Tina found out only when an aunt let it slip one night at the dinner table. Ryan's father went to strip clubs regularly, and no one in his family thought it was unusual—it was the kind of thing men did. Now Ryan had a new understanding of how his mother might have felt about this behavior when Tina expressed her distaste and disappointment at hearing that her father-in-law spent evenings watching pole-dancers. Ryan looked at her strangely and said, "But isn't it a compliment to women to know that we like to look at them?" Tina burst into tears. She said to him, "No, it's a compliment if you want to *listen to us*. That's why I started my affair. He listened to me; you never do."

New monogamists try to eliminate the gap that so often exists between explicit and implicit rules in the "old monogamy." From the viewpoint of the new monogamy, the trick is to establish and continually revisit rules to provide clear guidelines for maintaining a monogamous relationship—while keeping them loose enough to encourage growth and exploration for both partners. Some couples keep renegotiating their rules about monogamy, either directly or more subtly, as they age and pass through different developmental stages of their marriage. Accordingly, these rules can change, when they have children, when the children go off to school or leave home, during menopause, at retirement, or when the spouses' roles change—a wife's taking up a career once the kids are out of the nest, for example.

I see many couples in my office who look quite conventional and conservative, even staid, who report that they regularly meet with "play partners," or couples they've met online, for sex dates. Several with children who've just entered school seem to seek a break from the routine of work and domestic chores and want to rekindle a youthful sense of adventure, sexual excitement, and desirability. They want to remain monogamous, however, and have no intention of leaving their marriages. According to the terms of their monogamy agreement, they meet with the other couples purely for fun and sport; all sexual contact among all four (or more) happens together in the same room and only on weekends; and there's to be no individual outside contact between the partners of the different couples. The couples discuss their feelings about their sexual play both before and after the events.

In my office, we discuss these encounters—the emotions, personalities involved, complexities, and problems that arise—as we do any other marital issue. These new monogamists are just as committed to each other as traditional couples, though they may feel more connected to each other because of the mutual trust that they insist develops when partners allow each other to have sexual experiences with someone else and they themselves either watch or participate. In my experience, when rules are clear beforehand, complaints of jealousy or

feelings of betrayal are rare. Often the couples naturally grow beyond and leave behind the outside relationships. One couple, for example, stopped their "play" when they became pregnant with their third child.

The Three Parts of an Affair

Having made a stab at defining monogamy, new and old, let's look at infidelity. What does that loaded word really mean? Basically, like Gaul, all affairs can be divided into three parts: 1. the *dishonesty*;
2. the *outside relationship*;
and 3. the *sexual infidelity*.

All three exist on a continuum, with different levels and degrees.

Dishonesty can mean anything from hiding a full-fledged affair to not mentioning that one's attracted to, and having fantasies about the cute checkout boy at the grocery. Some dishonest behaviors are more egregious and destructive than others. Bob and Tanya, for example, had been married for 15 years when Tanya found Bob's letters to his lover Adele on his laptop when he left it open one night. The adoring and quite explicit letters made abundantly clear that he'd been sleeping with Adele for several years. But when Tanya confronted Bob, he adamantly denied the obvious evidence. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said flatly. "Those e-mails must be from other people—I never wrote them." She dragged him to therapy, but it was still weeks before he finally admitted what was screamingly obvious—he was indeed having an affair, which had been going on for years. The marriage broke up not, in my opinion, because of the affair, but because Bob's betrayal had been so deep, so obtuse, so unyielding, that Tanya felt (probably correctly) that she could never trust him again.

By contrast, Tim and Elaine came into therapy after he'd told her that his assistant, Missy, was coming on to him at work. That might have been no more than embarrassing except that Tim confessed to Elaine that he was attracted to Missy and was daydreaming about asking her out. In fact, Missy beat him to the punch and asked him to come to her apartment for drinks one night. He'd gone and, although he wouldn't admit to intercourse, it was clear that they'd had some sort of sexual experience. Afterward, he felt bad, told Elaine about it—without explicit details—and now they were in therapy to talk about his distress and their relationship. He wanted Missy—but he didn't want to want her—he wanted his wife, and he couldn't have both. This couple worked out their dilemma (Missy had to go) and Elaine never stopped trusting Tim because his honesty had given her a sense of confidence in him and their

relationship.

The second aspect of affairs is the *outside relationship*, which can be with a good friend at work or an old college drinking buddy, an ex-lover or ex-spouse one occasionally meets for lunch, a one-night stand, or a full-fledged mistress. In our culture, intimacy, privacy, secrecy, and loyalty are often reserved (in theory) entirely for the spouse. Within this conceptual model of "togetherness," sharing personal information with a close friend of the opposite sex may be considered a threat to the marriage. Sharing intimate thoughts and secrets with such friends can be considered a kind of theft from the primary relationship—"that's

our

business," the offended partner might think—and it can sometimes cross the line from friendship to romantic and sexual attraction. Even a stimulating intellectual, social, and political connection can be considered dangerous—political campaigns, for example, are rife with affairs that draw upon the adrenaline-fueled excitement and camaraderie of the contest. Even if never acted on physically, this outside "friendship" can feel like a betrayal to the spouse when the partner obviously finds it so much more vital, exciting, and intimate than the dull domesticity of home.

Brad and Janet had been married for 14 years, with two children, 10 and 12. Brad was a computer programmer who worked nights and Janet was a socially isolated, stay-at-home mom. Brad had exposure to many professional relationships, many of which were with women. Janet routinely read his e-mail, listened in on his phone calls, and checked his pockets, before it finally sank in that her husband did have only friendly professional contact with these women. At that point, they figured out ways to bring the women into the relationship on a social level, including them in dinner parties and other social events. Janet began to realize that Brad's friends could be her pipeline to a richer social life. Furthermore, with communication skills they learned in therapy, she was able to tell him when she felt uncomfortable about his women friends' calling him at the house or spending too much time on the phone with him. He was able to empathize with her feelings and, thereafter, included her or got off the phone.

The third and most fraught aspect of affairs is, of course, *sexual infidelity*. Again, infidelity occurs on a continuum and is sometimes as much in the eye of the beholder as in the actual behavior. Some, particularly those of strong religious beliefs, consider that "coveting" one neighbor's wife or "lusting" after another, not to mention using porn, are as much breaches of fidelity as checking into a cheap motel with a secret lover. By contrast, one spouse may allow the other free reign on Internet sexual relationships as long as there's no actual meeting or "touching." Sex with prostitutes or even a purely sexual quickie with someone may be

acceptable, as long as the sex is compartmentalized in a distant emotional universe far, far away from the Planet Earth of the "real" relationship.

What's a Therapist to Do?

In the culture of the new monogamy, couples are negotiating their fidelity in many ways that most therapists haven't explored or even considered much. When a couple tells me there's been an affair, I can't assume I know what they mean. I need to assess what exactly monogamy means to them or what constitutes a breach of fidelity to them. What are the terms of their explicit and implicit monogamy agreement? How can my view of fidelity as either a professional who's open-minded to their version of monogamy or as someone who's more traditional in her beliefs define the therapy so it works best for them?

Although I've always thought of myself as pretty open and reasonably "hip," I've been fired by more than one couple for being perceived as too traditional. There have been times when couples have come into my office and it's been hard for me to keep my jaw from dropping open as I listened to their stories. Sometimes I ask couples to recount how they manage their relationships, not so much out of voyeuristic curiosity about the details of their sex lives as out of a fascination with how they balance the multiple levels of commitment with their various partners. I often wonder aloud to client couples, "How do you keep it all straight?" Sometimes they'll indulge me. For instance, they'll explain that on those nights that they have outside partners, they'll agree that one will stay home with the kids, while the other meets the lover. Or they'll take turns having that lover at home for the night. Or sometimes they each have a lover at home on the same night, waking up in the morning to all have breakfast together. Sometimes they might have a boyfriend or girlfriend or another couple come home to bed with them. They come to therapy, not to get permission to do what they're doing, but to get their communication clear. The relationships that are working smoothly don't come into my office and I can only assume that they have found a way to balance the transparency and communication necessary to keep it all straight.

Sometimes I get confused by the characters in the plot, and couples have gotten frustrated with me, and felt that my more traditional views were showing. Perhaps my inability to concentrate on the complexity of some of the more integrated monogamy agreements interferes with the therapy. One couple told me they wanted to find a younger therapist who was a specialist in swinging. I asked if I could follow up with them. They looked at me like I had asked them for a sex tape.

The new monogamy, while a reality that I believe must be recognized, doesn't by any means ensure smooth sailing through the life of a marriage. Between two people making a life together, there'll always be plenty of opportunity for mutual misunderstanding, hurt feelings, miscommunication, sexual ennui, and conflict, regardless of which version of monogamy—new, old, or in-between—defines their relationship. But rather than impose a preset agenda on the couple, it's my job to help them make the best choices for their own relationship and work out a monogamy agreement in full consciousness of what they're doing. It isn't that one or the other can't have any secrets, for example; it's just that therapy should help them both agree about whether secrets are allowed. Often in the process of becoming fully aware of their original implicit monogamy agreement, couples are in a better position to renegotiate it, taking into account the people they are now as opposed to who they were when first married. Sometimes the result can be both greater individuation and a stronger marital bond.

One couple I see, Ned and Beatrice, who'd always kept what they thought was a clear agreement around monogamy—no outside sexual partners—discovered that they were both having sexual liaisons when they traveled for work. First Ned, the husband, got "caught" and confessed to several experiences that he described as "nonemotional, just purely recreational, sex." Beatrice felt hurt and betrayed, and wondered whether she should leave Ned. I asked her not to make any decisions for at least six months because her feelings were intense right then, and it would be hard to make a clear decision.

For several weeks, we worked on the betrayal of their original monogamy agreement. Then Beatrice confessed that she, too, had had several dalliances on the road, and found that really they hadn't affected her feelings for her husband. They were both surprised and wondered if this was a sign that they were growing apart. I asked them whether the secrets and the lying would eventually force them to feel as though they were living parallel lives. They felt it would, and that their answer (not mine) was to agree that each could continue their outside sexual experiences, but with clearer rules.

They agreed they could each have sex with other people outside the marriage, but only while traveling separately. In addition, they could never have sex with a colleague who worked for the same firm or have sex more than once with the same person. The other important rule was that they had to tell their partner afterward that it had happened, but with no details unless they felt compelled to share some emotional experience they were having about the incident. If that happened, they agreed they'd need to do some crisis intervention to figure out

what was happening in their marriage.

Both Ned and Beatrice said that they could never have had this type of open marriage earlier in their lives. "At younger ages, we would have been too threatened," she said. "But now I know neither of us is going to end the marriage. We love each other, but we married young and we never had sex with anyone else, ever. I figure I'm in my fifties, and how many years do I have left to have sex?" she added. "I wanted to experience what it was like, and I feel like I have my husband's permission, and that's made me feel so close to him. I feel like I'm a fully alive sexual being. I'm more attractive to my husband because I know that I'm attractive to other men. I can't explain it," she concluded, "but I feel like I love Ned more than ever."

There are marriages in which couples agree to live parallel, emotionally unconnected lives, while each partner pursues love and sex outside. It may be particularly hard for our culture to sympathize with these unions since they so profoundly break the basic "love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage" rule. In fact, not only are there times when you *can* have one (marriage) without the other (love), this arrangement may seem to the participants as the only one that really makes sense, given their circumstances. It may even seem like the only right thing to do.

For example, Jack and Karla married during their last year at an Ivy League college. At that time, their agreement was that Jack would pursue a career in law and Karla would go to graduate school, become a teacher, but give up her teaching career to be a stay-at-home mother when they had children. This she'd done. Now in their forties, with their children in their teens, Karla had blossomed, in more ways than one. She'd taken up graduate studies and was working on a doctorate in education, a field she loved. In addition, as she finally told Jack one night, she was having an affair with a professor from her graduate school—in fact, she'd been having an affair with him for 10 years.

In this explosive conversation with her husband, a high-powered litigator with a leading law firm, she said—yelled, actually—that he hadn't really *seen* her for more than a decade, except as the ever-dependable keeper of his house and mother of his children. She felt more like a golden retriever with him than a real person—although the golden would have gotten more attention. Meanwhile, her professor told her she was a unique, smart, beautiful woman, and it was largely due to his influence that she'd decided to continue her education.

Outside of her marriage, Karla had been living an entirely separate and distinct life with the professor—sleeping at his apartment on weekends when she told Jack she was at conferences, and getting virtually all of her emotional support, guidance, and companionship from him. She felt that he was her true partner and the man she loved. Jack was almost completely wound up with the single-minded pursuit-to-the-top of the legal food chain. He knew nothing of her, as she knew nothing of him or his life without her.

Although Karla felt her life would be meaningless without her lover (who'd asked her to leave Jack), she decided not to divorce, knowing it would publicly embarrass Jack and destroy his chances for promotion. The firm was old and traditional, the partners were all married and frowned on divorce, their wives were largely "company wives," and "family values" was virtually the firm's founding motto. She also worried that the financial upheaval would derail her future plans and compromise her kids' financial security. She'd only revealed her affair to Jack because she'd felt that it would be in both of their best interests if he took a lover as well—this might bring some type of equity to their marriage and ease her guilt.

They appeared to be in a real bind. Karla said that if she felt she wouldn't injure her husband's chances or her own and her kids' financial security, she would indeed leave him and pursue her own personal and professional growth. However, such a move would clearly jeopardize Jack's career. The solution she and her husband ultimately arrived at would most likely shock Dr. Laura. By the time therapy ended, Jack had acquired a lover and, after much calm negotiation, he and Karla agreed that they'd, in effect, carry on parallel lives: maintain outside lovers while staying in their primary relationship, if only for show.

Together, Karla and Jack made an informed, transparent decision to do what they thought would work best for them. True, their solution went against the current norm: if your marriage is irretrievable, leave it for a new romance and the new promise of "happily ever after," even if you must do it multiple times. Yet it could be argued that, in some ways, the approach they took was more adult, more orderly, and even more responsible to all parties concerned.

Monogamy for the Long Haul

If couples are becoming more flexible in the way they define monogamy, it could be partly because people live longer than in previous centuries and one spouse is far less likely to

leave the other widowed after 5 or 10 years than used to be the case. Now couples are expected to stay sexually and emotionally connected to each other for 40, 50, even 60 years. There's no precedent in any culture for staying married and passionate about the same person for that amount of time. We aren't trained or advised about how to remain monogamous and happy with a single sexual partner for half a century, probably because we've never before had to be.

Monogamy is a conscious choice made by human beings, and perhaps the best choice for our species. A long-term, connected, monogamous relationship makes for better parenting and encourages emotional creativity among humans: to get along with someone for many years, you have to learn certain relational skills, including self-control, psychological acuity, patience, conscious empathy, and simple kindness. If monogamy is not natural to humans but a choice that we make and negotiate every day, then it becomes an opportunity to protect our most intimate bonds while continuing to grow as individuals.

Marriage can no longer be regarded as a constant steady state, without variables or changes, which we automatically fall into once we've said our vows. It's a relationship that's continually being renegotiated—even if we aren't conscious of the fact. It's far better that we negotiate with each other with honesty, sensitivity, and eyes fully open to what we're doing than simply engage in magical thinking that it'll all work out if we just keep pressing blindly forward, wishing for happily ever after.

Tammy Nelson, Ph.D., is the founder and executive director of the Center for Healing. She's the author of Getting the Sex You Want and What's Eating You? Contact: healhere2@aol.com.

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