

Chapter 13

Love, Spirit, Health,
and the Sustainable Household



I am creating my marriage
with creativity, persistence and endurance
always finding the possibility of joy.



Chapter 13

*A*n exciting if somewhat strange thing can happen to a relationship as it progresses. As couples learn to accept each other and accept that they do not have to change each other, they learn to give honor to their relationship just as it is. This understanding becomes a faith stance that moves couples past pettiness, inflexibility, silly complaints, and arguments.

Even as the two of you work to keep your marriage sound, an unforeseen and unplanned next step happens. The bond between you deepens. Perhaps for no reason you can put your finger on, each of you begins to see something new or different in the other. It is like catching a glimpse of the divine in your lover.

You begin to have a deeper appreciation for each other's gifts, which might include expressions of compassion, loving kindness, collaboration, and teamwork. You begin to experience a shift in your relationship. The realization of this phase may start out as a simple expression of gratitude that sounds something like this, "I'm sure lucky. I thank God I have _____ in my life."

This statement is not made in the midst of a perfect marriage. Each of you may know one another so well that you understand each other's faults very well. You may even begin to see that faults have their own kind of gift. The two of you honor each other and the way life is. You may also notice even in showing your partner a small consideration that you feel a deeper connection to all of life. In these moments, couples realize even without having the perfect marriage partner, that they truly have found in each other their soul mate.

Love, A Celebration of Life

Lovemaking also takes on a special sense of celebrating life. It is as if in the middle of sex, you experience being in touch with all that is. There can be a feeling you and Creation are merging. You realize as you make love to your lover that you are also worshiping. You often experience both a sense of elation and humility. You feel Spirit.

Spirit can also surface simply in the way you communicate. It pops up in the daily thank-yous and honest compliments you give each other. Spirit



emerges strongly in the overall relationship mood as well. Spirit in marriage is nurtured when both partners understand the reasons for gratitude and express them.

A Couple's Journey to Maturity and Intimacy

Couples do not reach a state of intimacy and bliss with each other simply by wishing for it. It takes learning. It takes work. Here is a true story about this idea.

When I was letting other readers review the book, one of my volunteer editors recounted a story that illustrates, in a very practical way, the points here. She reflected on her marriage that lasted over half a century. This story illustrates how one couple began to move past the conflict and competition stage of marriage, to cooperation and later a deeper intimacy.

She and her husband, although they already had children, were still caught in a sense of quarreling. She was finally fed up with her husband and decided to get professional advice from a psychiatrist. Upon meeting the doctor she unburdened herself of her troubles and plaintively asked, "How can I change my husband?"

It took two meetings with this therapist for her to realize that, in fact, no one really changes the other person. After a long discussion on how she, not her husband, could change, the doctor wanted to know what the worst complaint was about her husband. She explained that every time her husband got a phone call, the whole family had to stop what it was doing so that he could talk. This seemed to be unfair since there was an extension phone that he could use instead.

After this session, a little later in the week, her husband got another phone call while the family was watching TV. He surprised his wife by saying, "Honey, I can get this call on the extension phone." After the call my friend stomped in to confront her husband. "You've been talking to my doctor, haven't you?" Her husband was flummoxed and completely taken aback by the comment. He truly had not spoken with the therapist but had decided to change this behavior on his own.

This was an eye-opening event. Her dialogue with her husband was truly, even though slowly, beginning to change. They still bickered but not in the way they had before. One day when her husband found that his wife had once again done something that displeased him, he demanded of her, "Why did you do that?"



Exasperated and not sure how to answer, since she had not meant any harm, she finally said the funny and incredible, "Well dear, when I awoke this morning I asked myself what could I do today to tick off my husband and this is what I came up with."

Their relationship was strong and both were able to laugh at this funny answer. Even with progress in the relationship, there still were some disagreements. One day her husband flat out said to her, "We're not planning to get a divorce, are we?" She agreed they did not intend to divorce. He said, "Well, why don't we act like it?"

This encounter finally changed from then on the whole nature of their future conversations. They remembered that they had decided to be each other's best friend. At this point the conflictive, competitive behavior of the power struggle completely stopped. Instead they entered into a cooperative, collaborative stage of marriage in which they really did act as if they were good friends.

The Negativity Trap

In this important discussion, it is crucial to learn that negativity does not have to dominate your marriage and that there are approaches to taking healthy attitudes and relationships to one another. It is also about how to reverse the negativity that couples can fall into.

Negativity can consume a marriage. Negativity is a creepy, strange monster that can invade our brains and our relationships. Negativity can lead to divorce and undermine goodwill, intimacy, and the possibility of reconciliation.

Even mature marriages can struggle with it. Reflection time is needed to grasp what negativity does in a marriage. As if watching a video, fast forward on the remote to the end. It is often when negativity has taken its toll and when marriage has failed that well-meaning friends want to search for the reasons "why." Your friends may not be directly accusatory but sometimes they ask intrusive questions. "What happened?" This question can sound like "What did you do wrong?" Another question that's more reflective and hopefully more positive may emerge: "What did you learn?"

There is no escaping this truth: you are responsible for the health of your relationship.



The Unforeseen Challenges

New challenges can and do intervene to upset the happy married life. Events can sabotage a marriage-overwhelming events that must be dealt with. Knowing that there are things beyond your control, the question becomes how do you sidestep the blame game and take a new, healthy, positive relationship to your marriage? Giving some thought in advance of a crisis is healthy. Being forewarned is being forearmed.

Here is a partial list of some overwhelming and some not-so-overwhelming situations couples deal with:

1. One of you suffers a catastrophic health crisis.
2. A mental illness occurs in which one or both of you need treatment.
3. Alcohol consumption becomes a crisis and gets worse over time.
4. Street or prescription drugs continue to be abused.
5. "Rogue" family members interfere in family harmony.
6. The media, movies, TV shows, and/or magazines make it appear your marriage is not okay.
7. There are advances from would-be lovers, for example, at work.
8. Physical weariness halts sexual intimacy.
9. Child rearing brings on physical exhaustion.
10. Career demands steal time from legitimate family activities.
11. Extended work time, over involvement in work, is used to avoid dealing with your marriage problems.
12. One or both of you lose jobs, straining your budget, and you must live with the stress of making do.
13. Feelings of personal vulnerability stop real communication.
14. One partner blames the other for their own interior challenges.
15. Shopping becomes an escape from your own marriage issues.
16. Your children play divide and conquer pitting you against each other.
17. Your spouse favors the children over you.



18. Your spouse favors their parents over you.
19. Both of you are thrown into grief at the death of a family member or even your child.

These are challenges that demand time for reflection, authentic and civil conversation, maturity, and leadership to resolve. What other negative influences or situations would you add to this list? What would you identify as sabotaging influences for your relationship?

Families in Crisis: An Emergency

There are probably some in the list above that sound familiar. Here is a warning. Do not take this situation lightly. These are not situations to be ignored; these are situations in which negativity can become dominant in your conversations. Negativity related to big challenges can lead to fighting and condemnation of one another.

If you are not able to talk these things out and still resolve that you are friends and lovers, you have come to a more dire situation. In this instance your relationship is experiencing an emergency!

You may not, at least not at first, recognize any one of these problems as a "make it or break it" situation. But problems and negativity can build. Take steps to get help. Fast. If, for example, the disagreements and the sense of condemnation is not turned around, it becomes the crucial factor that often eventually can lead you to divorce.

Most of us don't realize that we all have been trained to be competitive. As an example, it is not uncommon to get heated watching sports and even show disdain for the players. Marriage, however, is not a football game; it is not a way to make the basket over your partner's defensive guarding and not a way to run the bases and score. These ideas are all around us. Most of our education and sports exposure teaches us about competition. As a society we are not used to thinking about our relationships in a win-win way.

Generally speaking, there is a belief that in every relationship outcome someone must win and someone must lose. In marriage, if your idea wins you might assume your partner thinks you are right. However that may not be the case. Your partner may think it is not worth the fight. This, you see, is still a win-lose situation.



If you are a naturally competitive person-as mentioned before, we are all on some level taught to be-are you conscious of it? This often can be a negativity that is dangerous. To make peace in the marriage usually one of the partners is left to resentfully say, "I lost on this but, you know what, I can't always win. I will win another day." So the win-lose framework of negativity thinking keeps on going.

Expressions of negativity can directly attack the spiritual underpinnings of relationships. Negativity also can physically weaken the body, leave emotional wounds, and damage your marriage. Negativity then dominates the expressions within a marriage; negativity can become a self-perpetuating cycle.

A lot of negativity can show up as a partner's anger, inflexibility, or a sense of arrogance. The expression of arrogance often forms around the idea of: "I'm right and you're wrong!" Sometimes the next expressions can go to a more dangerous communication: that of condemnation or disdain for your partner.

Communication, reflection, and time can heal these situations. There are those times when each of you may want to do your "work." Who, for goodness' sake, as an individual or as a couple wants to deal with their baggage, shame, guilt, or other failures all the time? However, if there is not good progress between the two of you in terms of examining and dealing with your lives, and if disdainful attitudes continue in your marriage, you most likely will lose your relationship. If you are serious about your life together, then marriage counseling is a positive alternative. And as always is better for couples if they can access help early rather than later.

Marriage and Faith Traditions

Questions of faith in your marriage may require your attention. There is nothing about formally joining a faith that necessarily guarantees a successful marriage. Often couples marry outside of their own religions. Some of you may marry without having strong ties to faith. You may have decided to be on your own journey without formal involvement in a religion. Some of you may say you are "spiritual but not religious."

However belonging to a faith has helped marriages. Many couples, in seeking and finding a tradition to belong to, have also found they have a closer connection to each other and to community. If your religion makes



sense to you, you can also derive both personal satisfaction and a mission direction from actively participating in it. It may, if you have children, provide them a way to learn basic ethics and how to maintain healthy relationships.

Perhaps you have noted that all of us as human beings orient ourselves to seek and express spirit? It appears that within our genetic blueprint, all of us tend to come wired, one way or another, to be spiritual or, as some people call it, religious. Our programming does not tell us to belong to a specific religion; it simply shows up as our spiritual consciousness. All of us seek the solace of faith, yearn to be connected to all that is, and express ultimate concerns about life.

When and if you do have children, it will be your responsibility to teach them to be fair, kind, discerning, accountable, forgiving, and compassionate. Sometimes belonging to a religion can help us teach those important values. We also know faith teachings in our earliest childhood years-such as learning the golden rule, what is basically right and wrong, and to respect differences in other people-are critical in forming who we are, how we act, and who we become.

As we have said before, there is a lot the two of you can do to give leadership to your relationship. This section has been written so the two of you can explore your ideas and agreements about attitudes, relationships, spirit, and health.

Since your spiritual and religious views have so much to do with the success of your marriage, we will explore them in the questions below. Spirit, health, and sexuality have greater dimension than is covered here. Please add to your thinking with the following starter questions. It is important!





Your Relationship to Spirit: Identifying Important Factors Starter Questions

It is a pretty good assumption that the two of you have had a lot of discussion about sex. So the starter questions start at a higher level of thinking. As always these are starter questions and feel free to include and answer your own questions.

1. Do both of you come from the same religious tradition? What are the best things about your tradition?
2. If you are from different backgrounds, how important are the differences? Is there room for understanding and compromise?
3. How do you view traditional holidays and what holidays do you celebrate?
4. What kinds of celebrations do you think will be important for your family?
5. Have each of you talked about your understanding of spirit and your connections to formal religion?
6. What is it in your faith experience that your partner needs to understand, so the two of you can make a better decision about belonging to a formal religion? What will your approach be?
7. Do the two of you feel the need to belong to a formal religion, or is it something you can put off, at least for now?
8. What if you have children? Will you raise them in a faith tradition?
9. What about your own wedding? Will it take place in a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple?
10. How do you see the role of spirit in your own lives? What role do you hope spirit will play in your marriage?

11. What illustrates how faith has strengthened your friendship?
12. Have you caught glimpses of how you might be soul mates? What are those?
13. How have you already given leadership to your relationship? What did you do?

