

Preface

Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. Likewise, in hope of a heavenly marriage, we all want to change our partners, but we don't want to change ourselves. This book will help you see your mate not merely as someone who either fulfills or frustrates your desires, but as someone uniquely equipped to help you change for the good. This new perspective opens a door to the soulful partnership you dreamed of when you first fell in love.

Most marital self-help books deny the inevitable tension of close relationship. They insinuate that marital problems result from plain ignorance and incompetence, needing correction from a qualified authority. Hardly anyone disputes the benefit of acquiring certain relationship skills. Yet, this pragmatic approach imposes a vision of marriage that is both inflated and impoverished.

It caters to the popular ideal of marriage as a permanent state of contentment — if only we could get it right. Unable to achieve this fanciful goal, many couples feel like failures. Still, they persist in tilting at windmills, clinging to the impossible dream of a carefree, “happy” marriage. This vain ambition obscures a more promising reality: Marriage amounts to a strenuous program of personal and spiritual transformation.

Unlike the typical marital self-help manual, this book offers no quick fixes for couples willing to settle for peaceful coexistence. You will find no ammunition to bolster a demand that your spouse

behave in a certain way, on the authority of the latest expert. *The Sacred Dance* takes you deeper. It presents a vision for personal and spiritual awakening through intensive relationship. You will discover how radical intimacy infuses marriage — and sex, in particular — with lasting vitality.

As a psychotherapist working with spiritually oriented clients, I often see a connection between psychological and spiritual development. Growth in one domain bolsters growth in the other. Sometimes the two appear indistinguishable. Psychotherapy and spirituality share the ambitious goal of transforming consciousness. Both delve beneath the surface reality, to find a deeper truth. Both address the need to overcome social conditioning. Both seek the proper balance between self and other people. Both require self-discipline.

In marriage especially, psychological skills pay spiritual dividends. Do you know how to calm yourself when you get upset? Then you'll be able to forestall the escalation of many domestic quarrels. That, in turn, facilitates spiritual growth by allowing time to see your frustrations in perspective, beyond the immediate provocation from your partner. In recognition of this common ground, psychological and spiritual considerations intertwine throughout the chapters ahead.

The Sacred Dance features many practical suggestions you can put to use, with or without your partner's collaboration. Vivid examples, drawn from my personal and professional experience, show how. This does not require major upheaval in your life. Small shifts in attitude and modest adjustments in behavior can enrich your marriage and deepen your spirituality.

This book portrays a spirituality of marriage, without assuming any particular creed or religion. Still, it mainly draws on Judeo-Christian sources. That's my tradition, by birth and individual history. Surpassing any personal reasons, everyone growing up in America feels the weight of our predominant religious heritage. Whether we examine it or ignore it, accept it or reject it, this cultural

legacy inescapably colors our attitudes about love, marriage and sexuality. Bible quotations are offered *not* on authority, as revealed truth, but rather on their merits, as testable propositions, subject to confirmation in your experience.

Furthermore, Christianity has special relevance to the spirituality of marriage because of its unparalleled emphasis on love. All the essential Christian principles revolve around love: (1) God loves us, without exception; (2) We honor God by simply receiving this unconditional love, or *grace*; and (3) God calls us to love generously, in response. Setting aside other potentially divisive Christian doctrines, who would stand against love? Love measures any spiritual aspiration.

Many people of good will cannot easily assent to the idea of a personal God. If you prefer, substitute some other abstraction, such as a Higher Power. The implications for a spirituality of marriage remain unchanged. What we *do* matters more than what we *believe*.

Introduction

Marriage and the Spirituality of Everyday Life

Our culture tends to confine spirituality to solemn matters of religious belief and practice, distinct from our daily routines of work and play. According to this notion, attending religious services, reading scripture and praying qualify as “spiritual,” but walking the dog, making love and performing household chores do not.

Spirituality beckons, as well, in the ordinary activities of married life. Consider, for example, Greg and Cindy as they set out to repaint their bathroom. First they have to choose from a staggering array of colors, including thirty-seven different tints of “white.”

Greg hurriedly makes his choice, as Cindy settles down on a stool in front of the color charts at the paint store. “This ‘eggshell’ ought to do the trick,” he suggests.

Cindy furrows her brow. “Hmmm. This one called Navajo looks pretty good to me, too.”

“OK. Sure. I’ll go with that.”

“No, wait. I didn’t mean to necessarily *choose* that one,” Cindy protests. “I’m still looking.”

“Whatever. Let’s just pick one and get going. We have a lot of work ahead.”

“Not so fast. We’ll have to live with this color for a long time. I want to consider all the options.”

"Tell me you're kidding." Greg's heel taps impatiently. "White is white. They all look fine to me."

"Can't you see the difference? Eggshell has a warm, golden tint. The Navajo looks more pinkish."

"Yeah, fine. So which do you want?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Among the whites, I prefer the cooler tints. But now I'm beginning to consider these pale blues in the next section."

"You're driving me nuts," Greg exclaims a little too loudly. "You choose a color. I'm going over to get the brushes... unless you need to be there to check the bristles."

"Oh, Greg, don't be that way."

Finally arriving home with their supplies, Greg and Cindy discover they have very different ideas about how to proceed with the job. Now, Cindy is the one more eager to forge ahead. She wants to start right in applying paint, while Greg insists on filling all the tiny cracks, then sanding and cleaning the walls. He thinks they should also mask the glass and tile, which Cindy judges a ridiculous waste of time. They're just getting started, and already they both feel unappreciated and disrespected.

Like most couples, Greg and Cindy hate to fight. Right now especially, they need each other's cooperation to accomplish the task at hand. So why are they bickering about small matters?

Couples quarrel over seemingly trivial concerns in defense of personal principles they hold dear. Not lofty principles, perhaps, but worthy principles with surprising spiritual significance. Like Greg and Cindy, everybody yearns to feel appreciated for a good idea or a job well done. Everybody wants to do things her own way, sometimes.

On the surface, these concerns look petty. We rarely admit to caring about them. Still, over the long term in a committed relationship, they become legitimate matters of integrity. They represent dawning virtues: standing up for truth and justice, exercising personal power

in the face of opposition. Most arguments over who's "right" really hinge on competing claims for respect — between two people poorly equipped to confer it on themselves.

The inevitable conflicts of marriage prod each of us to forge a distinct identity, and consolidate our integrity. We need this sturdy, *separate* self in order to tolerate intense intimacy, permitting romance to ripen into love. By illuminating our weaknesses and insecurities, every conflict or disappointment in marriage actually represents a spiritual opportunity. We ordinarily shrink from opportunities like these, but spiritual awakening requires willingness to accept the transformative power of ordeal.

We're drawn to marriage in pursuit of inner wholeness, and unity with something beyond ourselves. We persist through hard times because of our inborn desire to give and receive love. As Bruce Springsteen put it, "Everybody's got a hungry heart." These are clearly spiritual aspirations.

Spirituality expresses the deepest meaning of life. It invites us to embrace the full truth about ourselves and the world we live in. It calls for ethical conduct and lifelong personal development. It prompts a search for meaning in suffering and death. Above all, spirituality aims to fulfill our transcendent existence in relation to something greater than ourselves.

From this perspective, we see the world afresh. We realize our kinship with the rest of creation. All the traditional virtues spring from this foundation: humility, thankfulness, generosity, forgiveness, peace, hope and especially love. Here, we can rise above past regrets and future anxieties to live in the present, where God resides.

Spiritual practice encompasses any activity that brings out our best, true selves, while reminding us of our essential links to other people and to God. When we recognize transcendent meaning in ordinary events, this is spirituality. When we respond to that meaning by way of our routine conduct, this is spirituality. Marriage presents unique opportunities for this type of spiritual realization.

Part One of *The Sacred Dance* introduces the Spirituality of Marriage, showing how it qualifies as a “vocation” in the Western religious tradition. A survey of the mysteries of love reveals their unique power to open our hearts and mobilize spiritual awakening. Married life presents potent exercises that cultivate universal spiritual virtues, such as thankfulness, humility, forgiveness and compassion.

In Part Two, you’ll discover the Five Qualifications needed to capitalize on these spiritual opportunities: self-commitment, wholesome shame, desire to live a shared life, tolerance for conflict, and appreciation for mystery and paradox. These qualifications are not severe. They mostly rely on sheer willingness. Are you willing to transcend yourself by plunging more deeply into relationship? Then read on.