

Q: How will your book, *The Sacred Dance: Spiritual Opportunities of Marriage*, help couples have a more satisfying marriage?

A: The main benefit is deceptively simple: *The Sacred Dance* shows how to recognize the spiritual significance of everyday married life. Most couples sense a spiritual dimension to their relationship now and then, usually in peak moments of charged emotional experience. Sometimes in good sex. Or consoling each other after a tragedy. Or while cooperating on an important task. Or simply sharing a good laugh. On these occasions, they feel a profound connection to each other -- and to God.

But for most couples, these moments are infrequent and irregular, a flash of grace that comes out of nowhere, only to recede into a dim memory. *The Sacred Dance* reveals how to tap this spiritual power more systematically, in the routine events of marriage. Along the way, you'll rediscover the soulful partnership you glimpsed when you first fell in love.

Q: What are your qualifications to write a book about the spirituality of marriage?

A: I have a doctorate in psychology, and thirty years of experience providing marriage counseling. I also researched the topic extensively, reading everything I could find on the subject of married spirituality.

But personal experience is equally important. The ideas presented in *The Sacred Dance* have been tested not only with clients, but in my own marriage of nearly twenty-four years. Before that, I was blessed to be born to parents who modeled mutual respect, affection and unwavering commitment. I count that as an important foundation for my subsequent professional training and experience, all of which are confirmed in my own marriage.

Q: How did you decide to write this book?

A: It developed naturally from my work as a psychotherapist. I have two specialties: marriage counseling with spiritually-minded couples, and individual psychotherapy with Catholic priests. The work with priests got me started thinking about spiritual vocation -- a vowed, disciplined way of life, designed to tame the ego, build virtue and draw close to God. I began to see parallels in the disciplines of marriage.

Of course, the spiritual potential of marriage has been recognized for a long time. But Christian Churches -- Catholic and Protestant -- offer relatively little guidance on *how* to make your marriage a spiritual path -- almost nothing compared to vast literature on individual spirituality. In the broadest terms, we're advised that couples should love each other like Christ loves the Church, and should strive to forgive each other as God forgives us. These are worthy ideals, but it's not at all clear how to realize them. For example, there's a lot of misunderstanding about forgiveness, which is routinely confused with tolerating mistreatment.

The Marriage Encounter movement provides a good start on married spirituality, by encouraging couples to speak from their hearts. Some Protestant denominations also have special programs for couples, often combining biblical advice with warmed-over pop psychology, like communication training. Again, these are fine as far as they go, but they barely scratch the surface.

So I was inspired to think about exactly what is needed for successful spiritual vocation of marriage -- a down-to-earth spirituality that taps the immense power of everyday married life. The essential attitudes and practices are portrayed in *The Sacred Dance*.

Q: How does marriage work as a spiritual “vocation”?

A: As with any spiritual path, it starts with discipline. In order to see beneath the surface of material reality, we have to narrow our options, sharpen our focus. The basic disciplines of marriage are lifetime commitment, sexual fidelity, time and attention devoted to mutual understanding, and accountability to each other -- not slavishly, but simply as a matter of respect, caring about your partner’s opinion, and taking it seriously.

Confined together with our mates in this arrangement, we chafe against each other until we are rubbed raw, our defenses worn through. All of our insecurities -- the ways we protect our egos by hiding from God and other people -- are eventually exposed. If we pay attention, we can hardly fail to apprehend some spiritual lessons in this emotional pressure cooker. Marriage prompts us to discover how to accommodate each other, while remaining true to ourselves. In other words, it provides a context for learning how to “love your (closest) neighbor as yourself.”

By investing your life totally in this one person, you improve the odds of finding the Kingdom of God, as revealed in your own heart, and the heart of your beloved. To take an obvious example of how discipline works, it’s only by limiting ourselves to sex with one person that we can possibly develop the trust and intimacy needed to discover and expose our true selves. Sexual infidelity is not only “wrong” because it upsets the social order and breaks a solemn promise. It’s a mistake because it dilutes the power of monogamous sexuality, keeping sex at the level of ego gratification.

One of the most profound nuggets of spiritual wisdom, expressed in all religions, is “If you want to find God, dig deep in one place.” Marriage provides a framework for that. As Joseph Campbell said, “If marriage isn’t the prime concern in your life, you aren’t really married.”

Q: You say that marital conflicts can serve as spiritual opportunities. How is that possible?

A: Naturally, we all try to avoid conflicts -- especially in marriage, with the one person whose respect and support we crave the most. But when conflicts arise -- as they inevitably do in even the best marriage -- we need to engage them. This means

neither insisting on your own way, nor reflexively giving-in, nor pressing for a hasty compromise.

Engaging the conflict means trying to understand why your own position seems sooo important to you, and why your partner's position seems sooo important to her. It seldom has much to do with the surface issue. It often feels like a matter of principle -- defending your integrity, or not wanting to admit something you feel ashamed of, or "that's just the way things ought to be done." Once the real issues are identified, the surface conflict evaporates, and work can begin on the underlying issue, which often has spiritual significance.

Of course, it's always easier to see your partner's issue, and harder to see your own. That's why marital conflicts rage on with no progress, arising again and again in various contexts. Most conflicts can be resolved as soon as one person -- either one -- can identify and admit his or her underlying issue. But ordinarily, no one likes to do this, because it feels like losing. Actually, of course, both partners win when this happens.

Q: Can you give an example of turning conflicts into spiritual opportunities?

A: The Sacred Dance contains many little stories that illuminate how this works. To cite a quick personal example, over the years, my wife Kathy and I have recognized a common theme in many of our conflicts: I think I'm only trying to help, by innocently offering some unsolicited, practical advice; she feels like I'm trying to control her. This issue often arises in the kitchen, where we usually cook dinner together. We're both pretty good cooks, but I think she uses too high a flame, at the risk of something boiling over, or sticking or burning. Admittedly, this seldom happens. But when she turns up the heat and walks away to do something else, I start to worry.

After a few years, we had a breakthrough when I was able to recognize and admit that I approach not just cooking this way, but *life in general*. I prefer to do things very carefully, cautious to guard against mistakes. She's willing to trade an occasional error for the benefit of speed. She might make more mistakes, but they're seldom of any consequence, and she accomplishes far more than I do.

Having recognized this, I'm better able to restrain myself from butting into her piquant sauce. When I'm tempted to do so, I try to just calm myself, letting matters unfold however they will. It comes as a great relief. Even when I fail to restrain myself, we're usually able to laugh about it now, rather than having an argument. At the psychological level, I'm learning that it's safe to relax and risk some mistakes. I'll still be lovable enough, and I don't really need the ego boost that comes from correcting other people.

At the spiritual level, I'm discovering how to trust in the diversity of God's creation. My way is not always the right way. Or even if I'm "right," it's not the *only* way. I need to let go, accepting that God doesn't need for me to watch over everything.

In fact, that's one of the reasons I was attracted to Kathy in the first place -- part of our chemistry. She's very different from me, and she has enough strength to challenge me when I'm out of line. We keep that spark alive when I try to become more like her, instead of trying to change her. Of course, it works the same in the other direction, as well. But that's her business.

Q: In *The Sacred Dance*, you emphasize the importance of embracing mystery. What does mystery have to do with spirituality?

A: Everything. Perhaps the most fundamental spiritual lesson is humility: recognizing that we're not God; admitting that there are things inherently beyond our comprehension. I'm a scientist, by training and temperament. So I believe in the value of the scientific method to uncover whatever we can about God's creation. I find no conflict between my faith and scientific knowledge. It's all to the glory of God.

Other questions, like the purpose of life, the meaning of suffering, and the nature of human consciousness are simply beyond the scope of science. They can be illuminated by scientific discoveries, but they will forever remain mysteries to contemplate.

The same is true of your marriage partner. In *The Sacred Dance*, it's vital to regard your mate with an attitude of wonder. Maybe at times, we can only manage to wonder, "What the heck was she thinking?" But at best, we can humbly admire God's genius in creating this unique human being, with all her talents and quirks. The most spiritually illuminating attitude you can have toward your partner is adoring curiosity -- contemplating a mystery that you will never completely comprehend.

Q: In Part Two of the book, you specify Five Qualifications needed to capitalize on the spiritual potential of marriage. Do you mean that couples have to develop certain abilities before they can even start down the spiritual path of marriage?

A: Not at all. You can start from wherever you are. It's just that a measure of these qualifications will facilitate the process, helping you to claim the spiritual opportunities. Plus, the qualifications are not severe. They're mostly a matter of willingness. For example, we just considered one "qualification:" an Appreciation for Mystery and Paradox. It can be rephrased as a question: Are you willing to cherish what you cannot fully understand or control? Suppose you realize that you tend to discount mystery and prefer black-and-white certainties over ambiguous paradoxes. On any particular occasion, you can instantly demonstrate this qualification with a deliberate decision to savor a mystery and tolerate the ambiguity.

Also, it's important to notice that the qualifications are not all-or-none features like blue eyes that you either possess or lack. They are dimensional qualities, like wisdom, that we continually cultivate, throughout life. The better developed these qualifications, the more fruitful your spiritual vocation of marriage.

Q: What if only one person in the marriage is interested in spirituality?

A: Of course, it helps if both parties are willing to notice the spiritual dimensions of marriage. But you can go a long way even without collaboration from your partner. *The Sacred Dance* shows how you can change *yourself* in ways that disrupt existing patterns in the marriage, requiring an adjustment from your partner. Regardless of your partner's response, your attitudes and actions have spiritual impact.

Q: Your book features a lot of stories, with detailed dialogue. How did you come up with them? Are they true?

A: They're based on dynamics that I've observed in marriage counseling and in my own marriage. But they aren't actual historical events. I think of them as being like myths -- *more* true than real life -- because they present some universal truth in concentrated form.

Q: Can you recommend another good book about spirituality and marriage?

A: Two books come to mind: one about God, the other about marriage. I like them because they each present a truly fresh take on subjects that have been thoroughly examined over thousands of years.

The first book is *God: A Biography*, by Jack Miles. It won a Pulitzer Prize a few years back. It considers God from a literary point of view, as the protagonist in the Bible. It might strike some people as almost heretical to ask questions about the "character development" of God, whom we traditionally assume to be all-knowing and unchanging. But for believers, like myself, this perspective illuminates not how *God* has changed -- but how our human *comprehension* of God has developed over the course of history. And how it is still developing today.

The second book is *Passionate Marriage*, by David Schnarch, a sex therapist. This book takes a revolutionary perspective on what he calls the "people-growing machinery" of marriage, and sexuality in particular. It was a major influence on my thinking. (*Passionate Marriage* might have reached a wider audience but for the frequent use of coarse language, which offends some people. If you can get past that, the book has a lot to offer.)

Still, Dr. Schnarch makes only passing, vague reference to the spiritual dimensions of marriage. So if you want to bring together the best of psychology and spirituality, as they relate to marriage, you'll need to read *The Sacred Dance*.

Q: Are you working on another book? If so, what's the topic?

A: Yes. The working title is *The Power of Love: How to Change Your Mate by Changing Yourself*. It takes off from the conventional wisdom that we should never try to change our partners; rather, we should simply accept them exactly as they are.

That's true, of course. I teach it to couples. The problem is that no one ever follows this advice -- myself included. Every husband and wife in history has tried to change each other. And it's only natural, because of the stake we have in marriage. When one partner underachieves or behaves badly, the entire family pays the consequences. So we have a legitimate right -- a duty even, in the Sacred Dance -- to call out the best in each other. There's a saying I like: "Just because I accept you totally, exactly as you are, doesn't mean that I abandon all hope of you improving."

So the problem isn't that we try to change each other. The problem is in what sort of things we try to change, and how we go about it. Complaining, scolding, and manipulating are not only unpleasant for everyone, they never work. *The Power of Love* will show how to wield influence graciously and effectively in marriage, in ways that your partner will actually welcome.