

SPIRITUAL INTIMACY AND THE COUPLES DIALOGUE

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HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality has to do with human beings' search for greater meaning, value, and a connection to something larger than themselves, which might be called "the ground of being". Our spirituality may be an inner sense of knowing, or an understanding of a relationship to a Supreme Being. It may include a sense of growth and development, an understanding that one is connected to and included in a larger evolutionary movement of life force. Those who subscribe to this latter belief often feel that they can participate in the evolution of consciousness and describe their journey as an awakening, or an expanding awareness of one's connection "to self, others, the non human world, and the ground of being. (Canda, 1988, p. 43). Spiritual growth may have something to do with becoming increasingly aware of one's immanent connection to the larger whole, being connected essentially at the core of one's being: that there is a life force which connects everything and that, in fact, we can be aware of it, and live from that awareness.

There are many spiritual traditions, some contemplative, many oriented toward social and political action in the world; each prescribes practices, behaviors, and attitudes which, if practiced, point to actualizing one's spiritual potential in the way that particular tradition understands spirituality.

Ken Wilber (1986), a well known American Buddhist philosopher and writer, suggests that psychological and spiritual growth exist on a continuum of development; spirituality grows in humans the same way as their maturation from childhood to adulthood. He says psychological development *is* spiritual unfolding. What, then, might be said about the connection between spirituality and relationship, or spirituality and intimacy?

BECOMING AN ADULT

Human beings' psychological growth occurs in relationship to others. This process begins before birth and continues for better or for worse throughout life. Perhaps we can think about the process of becoming a mature loving adult as the growing ability to be connected to oneself as well as to the reality of the other. This notion results from a spiritual belief system that everything in the universe is connected to everything else and that connection - disconnection, contact - withdrawal, attachment - separation are natural human rhythms in relation to self and others.

WHAT IS INTIMACY? WHAT IS SPIRITUAL INTIMACY?

Intimacy is the process of opening core aspects of ourselves to another (Schnarch, 1991). Thomas Moore says that intimacy comes from the Latin root "inter" meaning within, and could be defined as "profoundly interior" (Moore, 1994, p. 23). True intimacy cannot happen between adults who are not somewhat differentiated, who cannot maintain a sense of self while being intensely close to another. Differentiation is a maturation process. It takes time, intentionality,

and the ability to be present with all the complex feelings, which arise when we are confronted with the presence of another *different self*.

Spiritual intimacy is the process of profoundly connecting the core of one's being to another without giving up one's own self. Spiritual intimacy means that the reality of each partner is valid, important, real and must be actively honored by both people. It does not mean we need to agree with, or feel good about the other at any given time. It simply means that we must be willing to, as Martin Buber says "turn toward the other" (Buber, 1965a, p.22) and thus, confirm the other's point of view. This ability to transcend one's reality while not losing one's own groundedness in self is what results in spiritual intimacy.

How is this spiritual? First, when we are connected to our core, we have overcome personal obstacles that stand in the way of experiencing our natural state of being (Welwood, 1996, p. 53). Being deeply connected to ourselves often creates a link to the larger whole of which we are a part. In this sense, there is an awareness of belonging to the ground of being, to something beyond our limited human perception. Secondly, holding the inner self intact while simultaneously making deep contact with another requires a level of maturation which is the result of a profound growth process; it means the ability to rise above our personal likes and dislikes, our positioned way of seeing things, while not losing groundedness in it. Thirdly, if we have been able to differentiate while in a partnership, this implies the willingness to expand self-knowledge; as Welwood (1996) points out, "We can only know another as deeply as we know ourselves (p. xiii) He continues:

How we relate to someone we love provides an extremely clear and accurate mirror of how we relate to ourselves. For this reason relationships can help us face ourselves and understand ourselves more rapidly and profoundly than any other aspect of worldly life. Seen in this light love becomes a path of awakening - rousing us from the sleep of old unconscious patterns into the freshness and immediacy of living more fully. (p. xiii)

Falling in love provides a glimpse of true nature, then entering long term relationship brings us up against whatever prevents us from being present, being real, being ourselves. The obstacles to loving. If love and presence are to become integrated in our lives and our relationships then we need to understand what we do to obstruct them and how to remove the obstructions. This is the path of conscious relationship. (p. 7)

SAFETY IN RELATIONSHIP IS A BRAIN FUNCTION

Safety is the principle that deep relaxation of the primitive brain center which controls danger and safety signals (fight or flight response) will enable partners to validate one another's reality, differentiate and claim themselves as individuals, and thus provide the empathic attunement and caring to themselves and their partner that is necessary to create a more satisfying, passionate relationship. We can say safety is a state of being which includes the physiological relaxation response (muscle relaxation, slowed heart rate, deep breathing, lowered blood pressure, lowered metabolic activity, and makes it possible for increased levels of self disclosure in the presence of the other (Benson, 1971). A commitment to safety in the relationship by both partners paves the

way for a strong sense of trust and connection, leading to differentiation and the experience of spiritual intimacy.

THE CONSCIOUS DIALOGUE

The Conscious Dialogue is the structure within which safety, and thus deeper levels of "differentiation with integrity" (Luquet, 1996) can occur. Deepening levels of differentiation result in the experience of connection: to the core of oneself, to the core of other, and in the sense of connection to the larger whole of life, reality, the universe. The dialogue is a vehicle through which couples may discover deeper connection, not just to themselves and each other, but Spirit. It is one tool couples can use to deepen their relationship and discover levels of intimacy heretofore unexplored. When used regularly it creates the framework from which Spiritual Intimacy can be experienced.

Practicing the dialogue generates safety and relaxation between people. Safety is the principle that deep relaxation of the primitive brain center, which controls the fight or flight response, will enable partners to validate one another's reality, differentiate and claim themselves as individuals. This allows them to provide the empathic attunement and caring to themselves and their partner that is necessary to create a more satisfying, passionate relationship. We can say safety is a state of being which includes the physiological relaxation response (muscle relaxation, slowed heart rate, deep breathing, lowered blood pressure, lowered metabolic activity, making it possible for increased levels of self disclosure in the presence of the other. A commitment to safety in the relationship by both partners paves the way for a strong sense of trust and connection, leading to differentiation and the experience of spiritual intimacy.

HOW DOES THE DIALOGUE WORK?

The purpose of the Conscious Dialogue is to empathically enter the world of the other. Its power lies in your intention to not only validate your own reality, but to get inside another person's heart and head, put yourself in their shoes, so to speak.

The Conscious Dialogue can be used almost anytime. It is especially helpful when:

1. You are in the middle of a conversation and notice that you are beginning to react or get upset.
2. You are aware of an interpersonal conflict and both of you want to sort it out.
3. You want to discuss a subject, which might trigger reactions or difficult feelings.
4. You are not sure you can express yourself clearly and need a safe structure within which to explore your feelings, thoughts, or opinions.
5. You want to be heard and understood.

THERE ARE TWO ROLES IN THE *CONSCIOUS DIALOGUE*: THE SPEAKER WHO DELIVERS *CONSCIOUS MESSAGES* AND THE LISTENER WHO PRACTICES *CONSCIOUS RESPONDING*.

HOW TO DELIVER CONSCIOUS MESSAGES

1. Ask for time.
2. Make I statements
3. Talk about observable behaviors, your imagined conclusion about them, your feelings, and your wants and needs: Example
 - WHEN YOU walked away just then
 - I IMAGINED you were upset with me
 - AND I FELT afraid and angry
 - WHAT I NEED is for you to stay in the room with me when we are in the middle of a discussion or at least call a time out so I know what is happening.

CONSCIOUS RESPONDING

Conscious Responding is a three-part process consisting of mirroring, validating and empathizing. Its focus is the listener's ability to provide a "safe container" for the speaker to share all of what he or she is feeling. To do this, a structure is provided so both people can "hold onto themselves" even as they are engaged with the other. This method is adapted from Harville Hendrix' Getting the Love You Want.

Mirroring

What I hear you saying is...
 Did I hear you correctly?
 Is there more about that?

Empathizing

You make sense to me because... or I can understand that... (Take time to validate the speaker's point of view. You don't have to agree or like it, just acknowledge that for them it's real.) and then

“The feelings I heard you tell me were” or “I imagine you might be feeling”...

AWARENESS FOR THE LISTENER AS YOU PRACTICE CONSCIOUS RESPONDING:

1. Relax, breathe, and stay present with your body, creating an energetic container for your feelings.
2. You must set aside your own agendas and reactions. Stay present as feelings come up, but remain focused on listening and deeply understanding the other's point of view. You'll have time to share your perspective and feelings.
3. Allow your partner to have their full experience and feelings. You are separate people. Maintain your personal internal boundaries.
4. Don't allow yourself to become flooded or overwhelmed. If you need to stop and mirror at every sentence, do so. Let them know you want to make sure you understand what they are saying.

This process has been used by many couples as well as singles to strengthen communication, build deeper understanding, and resolve conflict. It works for the people who use it on a regular basis. The decision to make communication and intimacy a more conscious process is not always easy. It takes a willingness to grow your self, to take responsibility for creating empathy and respect. It means being willing to hold onto yourself and be present with your feelings in the face of the very real differences that arise between us as human beings. This is both an exciting as well as difficult process. Practicing the conscious dialogue and developing spiritual intimacy is for people who want to become Relationship Giants.

There are many self-help tools available to couples and singles wanting to improve their relationships. The Conscious Dialogue is just one of them. For more information on workshops, counseling, tapes, books, or private retreats please contact Kate or Joel Feldman at www.consciousrelationships.com

References for this article available upon request from Kate. Please email Kate@consciousrelationships.com

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Whether you're single or part of a couple, we're passionate about helping you create the most fulfilling relationships with the people you love. We believe the future of humanity depends upon people skillfully and consciously loving each other and their children. We want to help end the cycle of generational wounding that gets passed on through families, communities, nations, and our global family. Specifically, our approach will facilitate you in experiential exploration of yourself and educate you in the practice of new relationship behaviors and skills.

We are a couple working on our own relationship. Our relationship services are based on our personal experimentation and practice. We promise you a safe, opening and transformative experience in which to learn and practice the relational skills we share with you.

We have been helping couples, singles, and groups create satisfying relationships for nearly thirty years. Joel is a certified life skills coach, couples therapist, mediator and organizational consultant. Kate is a licensed psychotherapist whose focus is relationship transformation for couples and individuals. Our background includes Imago Relationship, Gestalt, and Family systems therapies, as well as EMDR. We were both founding members of Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, the largest residential wellness center on the east coast. Recently we realized a long time dream of bringing into our lives more adventure, sunshine, and connection to nature by relocating to southern Colorado from Massachusetts.

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