

Introducing Spiritual Partnership



Spiritual Partnership is a new model for couples, a different understanding of the purpose of loving relationships and how they work. It does not require that you be religious or part of an organized religion, or that you maintain a spiritual practice. As you will see, *spiritual* is different from *religious*. It simply means that you align with “spiritual” values, as we define them here.

Spiritual Partnership expands the possibilities of what you can experience with each other as a couple. No matter what the status of their relationship before they began to practice Spiritual Partnership, many couples who engage in this kind of relationship report greater ease between them; freer, more passionate love; and less focus on areas of conflict. Most important, they experience increased inner strength and personal peace and well-being.

For example, Jan was exasperated because her husband, Terry, was extremely controlling when it came to their money. He complained every time Jan spent money on anything, even essentials. Jan tried every communication skill she could find. She expressed her

own frustration, she suggested possible compromises, she declared ultimatums, she tried to understand what was behind Terry's anxiety. Their fights escalated, and the tension in their household increased.

Then Jan learned the principles of Spiritual Partnership and began using Loving Actions. She stopped trying to solve the problem. She moved directly toward creating a pleasant atmosphere in their family. She found ways to meet the family's needs without upsetting Terry. She found actions that conveyed to Terry that she had compassion for his anxiety, instead of trying in vain to change it.

Within a week of her changes, Jan felt back in charge of her own life and experienced personal power she had not felt for years. The atmosphere in their house transformed; the tension between the two of them melted away. Terry was still anxious and controlling about money, but Jan had found ways to manage these qualities rather than fighting against them.

The changes Jan made are the ones we will learn thoroughly in this book. First, in this chapter, we will lay the foundation on which the Loving Actions of Spiritual Partnership are built. We will learn:

- The historical context of Spiritual Partnership
- What we mean by "spiritual"
- Why communication has failed so many couples
- Exactly what a "Loving Action" is
- The new way that change happens in Spiritual Partnership
- How to make your relationship a spiritual practice

How Spiritual Partnership Fits Historically

If we were to divide modern relationships into three historical stages, with Stage One being the classic 1950s model of homemaker and breadwinner, the second stage would be our rebellion against the

inadequacies of that model. In Stage Two, we struggled to achieve equality between partners and a broader range of acceptable relationship lifestyles.

In the past forty years, we have focused a great deal of attention on equality and fairness in our relationships, on better communication and conflict resolution techniques. Although not every individual marriage has achieved these ideals, the model of equality and fairness in relationships is widely accepted and practiced.

We are ready now for Stage Three, in which we will build on and incorporate the equality and fairness we achieved in Stage Two and move beyond it. In Stage Three, the emphasis will be on love and spiritual depth.

When my husband taught ceramics, he would draw on the blackboard a figure that looked like an hourglass. The bottom half of the hourglass, he would say, is learning the basics. You follow all the rules carefully to achieve competence at designing, throwing, glazing, and firing a pot. Then he would point to the middle of the hourglass and say, "This is the pinnacle of mediocrity." Your ceramic pots are competent, but they are not imaginative, individual, magical; they don't yet transcend the ordinary. However, it is only when you have mastered fundamental skills and achieved this pinnacle of mediocrity that you can burst through to levels beyond that to express your true individual creativity.

In our brief history of relationships, we hover today at the center of the hourglass, the pinnacle of "equal, fair, open relationships with good conflict resolution skills." These are important values, but if we stop with them, we risk limiting our relationships to the ordinary. Now that human endeavor has advanced to a time in which spiritual consciousness is rising, we understand that love is not limited to passion and good communication alone, but can include a spiritual dimension as well.

It is that spiritual dimension that we will explore in depth in this book, and it is for that reason that I have chosen to call Stage Three couples *Spiritual Partners*.

Spiritual Partnership is *not* simply a bigger and better version of the fair and equal relationships we have valued for years. Spiritual Partnership is qualitatively different. You are about to discover some methods and techniques for resolving differences that I strongly suspect you have never tried before. You will not be invited to sit down with your partner and talk things out. Instead the focus will be on what it means to love and on highly specific ways that you can put your love—love for yourself and love for your partner—into action.

What Do We Mean by *Spiritual*?

Spirituality is a widely used term, and we all know vaguely what we mean by it. I need to be precise about what I mean, however, because my understanding of the term *spirituality* underlies everything in this book.

I offer a comprehensive, in-depth definition of spirituality in Chapter Fourteen, but I don't want to delay getting us into the practical aspects of Loving Actions by giving the full definition now. So I offer here an abbreviated definition that we can use as we get immediately into the heart of what Spiritual Partnership is and how it can transform your relationship. You can refer to the full definition in Chapter Fourteen whenever you feel a need for it.

First, I believe that spirituality is a natural and universal element of our lives that we choose to move toward or to ignore; that it is possible to be more spiritual, less spiritual, or not spiritual at all. A case can certainly be made that because we are all made up of mind, body, and spirit, everyone has a spiritual dimension, and that it is

not possible to be “nonspiritual.” But I have chosen to use *spiritual* to mean “being aligned with your spirit” or “choosing spiritual values.” You can choose a spiritual approach to your relationship, for example, or a nonspiritual approach. So spirituality is not an automatic part of a relationship but rather a commitment, an act of will.

EXPERIMENT 2



What Is Spirituality?

Before reading further, you may want to take a few minutes to define spirituality for yourself. In your journal or in a conversation with a friend, answer these questions:

1. What do you mean when you use the term *spiritual*?
2. Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person? Explain your answer.

To be spiritual, I submit, is to recognize your connection to the universe and to everyone and everything in it, *and to strive each moment for the thoughts and actions that will increase and not decrease this connection.* Your spiritual journey is your own personal journey

- **From isolation to connection.** We are not separate from one another, but one with the universe and everything in it. Anything that moves you toward connection is spiritual; anything that moves you toward separation or isolation is not spiritual.
- **From your conditioned personality to your authentic self.** Each of us consists of layers of beliefs and behaviors that obscure our pure, authentic self. “Spiritual” means moving toward authenticity, toward who you really are.

- **From fear to love.** Love is a gentle, powerful force, too often overwhelmed by fear, which appears in many disguises. Our spiritual task is to recognize how fear stops us, and to progress through it so that love can move freely in our lives.
- **From sleep to consciousness or awareness.** The only true prison is the one we each create with limited consciousness. To be spiritual is to stay curious about our own areas of blindness, of limited or inaccurate vision, and to be open to new awareness.
- **From control to surrender.** You can't control the universe; instead, be open and receptive to what it offers.
- **From restlessness to inner peace.** As we become more connected, authentic, loving, aware, and receptive, we will experience deep inner strength and radiant joy.

If a spiritual person is one who is moving toward connection, authenticity, love, consciousness, receptivity, and inner peace, then a spiritual practice, such as your relationship, is any behavior that brings you into increasing alignment with the you who embodies these qualities. In other words, *spirituality is bringing yourself into closer and closer alignment with your highest self.*

How Spiritual Partnership Is Different

There are two major ways in which Spiritual Partnership differs from Stage Two relationships.

In Spiritual Partnership,

1. Loving Actions replace communication as the primary tool for problem solving and relationship enrichment.

2. Your focal point shifts from your partner and your relationship to your own spiritual path.

Let us now look in depth at both of these significant differences.

Difference 1: Loving Actions Replace Communication as the Primary Tool for Problem Solving and Relationship Enrichment

Stage Two relationships rely on a fundamental principle that we are now ready to rise above: that the skills we use in the marketplace—such as negotiating, bargaining, and reaching agreements—will work in love relationships. They won't. The purpose of the marketplace is to win, to gain advantage over others. The purpose of love is to love. They are two different universes.

For decades, we have been relying heavily on elaborate rules for sharing feelings, negotiating, and even “fair” fighting. When you have a conflict, what can you do? Find time to sit down and talk it over with each other, argue, negotiate. What else is there? When you want to feel closer, you have an honest conversation. Tell your partner what you need to feel loved. Listen to your mate's deepest feelings.

I want to be very clear that I am not against communication skills! Couples who know and use them are likely to have a far better relationship than couples who don't. Knowing that your partner has truly understood and accepted a painful, joyful, or sensitive feeling you have is a deeply moving and bonding experience. Resolving a conflict using excellent communication skills can be joyful rather than painful. In fact, if you are reading this and you don't know how to use “active listening” or what an “I” statement is, the best primer I know for basic, extremely important communication skills is the

classic book that as far as I know invented those terms: *Parent Effectiveness Training* by Thomas Gordon. Even though the book is written for parents, especially Chapters Two and Six are a superb explanation of fundamental communication skills, which are useful for every relationship in your life! Spiritual Partnership builds on these skills.

But communication can also *cause* problems, and, because communication skills are a limited tool, relying on them may restrict your potential as a couple. Loving Actions open up whole new frontiers for your relationship.

Why Talking Is Not Enough

There are four ways in which communication can be problematic or limiting as a relationship-enhancing tool:

1. Your partner may be unavailable, unwilling, or even unable to talk. If the two of you are depending entirely on communication and have no other tools available to you, when your partner simply won't talk or listen, you may feel stuck, maybe even utterly frustrated, with nowhere else to turn.

2. In many couples, one partner is better at communicating than the other. So when you use communication, you are relying on a skill that puts you on an unequal playing field from the very start, puts one of you at an automatic disadvantage, and creates frustration for the other. Relying only on communication will exacerbate this problem, not solve it. It will be like trying to remove your finger from one of those woven finger traps by pulling harder and harder and only trapping yourself worse.

3. A third problem with relying exclusively on communication to solve problems and create closeness is that communication skills

are high-level, difficult skills that most people have not even begun to master. Effective communication does not come naturally to most people. In fact, what we seem to be born with instead is a natural tendency to use poor communication:

- To become defensive when attacked
- To offer an immediate solution when someone cries or complains
- To blame the other guy when there is a problem instead looking at our own role
- To gloss over feelings instead of acknowledging them
- To ask indirectly for what we want
- To criticize others more often than we affirm them

All these extremely ineffective communication patterns are ubiquitous. Unlearning them and replacing them with effective skills is work that most people never have the opportunity or interest to do.

When communication is done badly, it exacerbates the original problem, creating more confusion, frustration, and anger than ever. *Poor* communication doesn't solve problems; it creates them!

4. The really giant problem with communication is the hidden agenda it so often brings with it. When two people sit down to communicate about a problem, what they are really trying to do is get the other person to see things their way, and to change.

Trying to solve a problem by getting your partner to change is by far the most common problem-solving approach there is. Yet it is the worst possible method! It is neither effective nor spiritual because (1) it never works and (2) it does not honor your partner. As we shall see, Loving Actions do work, and they do honor your partner.

As we said, *good* communication between two people who love each other and who treat each other in a spiritually mature way is a valuable tool and a great pleasure. One major difference between Stage Two relationships and Spiritual Partnership is this: *in Spiritual Partnership, good communication is a goal you strive for, not the means you use to get there.* Good communication flows naturally when you have become Spiritual Partners through the use of Loving Actions. As we shall see in detail in Chapter Twelve, good communication is the natural *result* of a highly evolved, thriving intimate relationship.

Loving Actions

If we are going to replace the old tool of communication with a new approach, let's find out more about it. What are Loving Actions?

A Loving Action is an intentional behavior that

- Is motivated by a desire for spiritual growth
- Is unilateral
- Requires discipline, an act of will
- Is experimental

The good news is that deciding to use a Loving Action does not require you to change the way you feel. You can't order your feelings or emotions around anyway. All you have to do as a Spiritual Partner is decide to try an experiment, even if you don't feel like it, to try a new action or behavior. Hoping that your feelings will change or waiting until you feel like changing your behavior is only a way of digging yourself deeper into your unpleasant feelings. But changing your behavior as an experiment, even when you don't feel like it, can definitely lead to a change in your feelings. In other words, you will never feel your way into new actions, but you can act your way into new feelings.

We can best understand each of the four characteristics of a Loving Action by looking at an example.

Lyle had gone to great lengths to plan a surprise for his wife, Wendy. An old friend of hers, Deb, was coming to town. Lyle arranged for Wendy to meet him at a restaurant at six o'clock, where Deb would also be waiting.

At a quarter to six, Wendy called Lyle on his cell phone to tell him she wouldn't be able to make it.

Working late, usually unexpectedly, was a pattern of Wendy's that caused a lot of friction between the two of them. In the past, Lyle's pattern was to get a righteous tone in his voice and to lecture Wendy about how inconsiderate she was and how this just couldn't continue. He kept looking for ways to convince her that she was being selfish, that he too had legitimate needs, and his frustration would escalate, because he felt there was nothing he could do to make Wendy change her ways.

Wendy loathed the way Lyle became paternalistic with her, and she felt misunderstood and unsupported. She couldn't help these work crises, her work was important, and she contributed a lot of income to the family. She needed some slack.

But Lyle had recently begun attending a Spiritual Partnership group, so he decided to experiment with Loving Action 3, act as if, which we will learn in Chapter Four. Lyle was upset, but he deliberately acted as if he were loving and understanding, as an experiment. He asked Wendy, in an interested way, what was going on at work. While she was talking, he had a chance to pull his thoughts together; he realized that the surprise would be just as much fun if he and Deb waited until Wendy came home later. Then Lyle wished Wendy good luck with her project, said "I love you," and told her he'd see her later.

Lyle and Deb had a lovely time getting to know each other better, and later at home, they all had a wonderful time with the surprise.

So in what ways was Lyle's behavior a Loving Action? Let's see:

1. *Lyle was motivated by his desire to grow as a spiritual person.* He knew from his own meditation practice and from spiritual tapes, books, and speakers that the spiritual path would be to return to a quiet mind, to let his inner calmness prevail rather than to react out of habit to this circumstance.

"It's not what happens to you, but how you deal with what happens to you," said the voice in his head. He got a vision of the Dalai Lama and Jesus and knew that they would not be all torn up inside, angry, helpless, and out of control at Wendy's behavior. He wanted to be a stronger spiritual person, to be more loving and accepting, and to do something that would move him in the direction of connection to Wendy, not separation from her. He realized that even if he did not *feel* that way, he could choose to *behave* that way.

2. *Lyle's action was unilateral.* He didn't announce his decision to Wendy. He didn't ask for her cooperation. He didn't worry about whether his action was "fair." He moved completely beyond who was right and who was wrong to a different realm entirely by asking, "No matter who is right and who is wrong, what can I do to make a difference?"

The hard part of taking a unilateral action is that you have to do all the work by yourself. But the great part of it is that you *get* to do it all by yourself! You can skip altogether the monumentally difficult step of having to secure cooperation from your partner! Suddenly, all the cards are in your hand. You don't have to wait until your partner "gets it" or until your partner cooperates or agrees or until your partner changes. Being able to affect the situation all by yourself gives you enormous freedom. It empowers you! It gives you power, not over other people, but inner power, inner strength. It lets you out of the prison of being at the mercy of someone else.

All Loving Actions are unilateral. They may even have a kind of secret quality about them, as though you are a little elf or angel who did a good deed but will never tell. Sometimes you may never reveal your Loving Action to anyone. You certainly can, of course, and may want to if you are in a spiritual support group or if you and your partner are on a spiritual journey together.

But the point is, a unilateral act is its own reward. Lyle did not need to tell Wendy what he did to salvage their evening in order to elicit her praise or to feel even better about himself. He knows inside himself that he had the courage and discipline to take a Loving Action and that it brought him everything it promised: he became stronger in his spiritual life, and he single-handedly turned a potential fight into a pleasant evening.

3. *Lyle's action required discipline and an act of will.* There is a reason spiritual "practice" is not spiritual "theory." Spiritual growth is about making difficult choices and then practicing them over and over. Eventually they will become less difficult and even more natural than doing things the old way. Spiritual growth is about turning back the strong tide of habit and conditioning. It is about overcoming laziness and apathy.

When you are climbing a mountain, you won't reach the summit if you give in to the voices that say, "Hey, it isn't worth all this hard work. Just turn around and go back down. So what if you don't get to the top?" Part of spiritual work is staying disciplined, keeping yourself motivated, because the work is hard and the rewards sometimes seem dim and remote (although that is less true when relationship is your spiritual path, for in your relationship, the rewards are sometimes more immediate, as they were for Lyle).

4. *Lyle's action was an experiment.* The outcome was not pre-determined, but open ended. Lyle needed to try acting as if, but he had no idea what the result of his action would be. It was an

experiment. The goal of his action was simply to see what would happen.

Lyle didn't say, "I'm going to act as if I'm not angry so that Wendy will feel guilty," or "I'm going to act as if so we can have a good evening," or "I'm going to act as if because then Wendy will appreciate me more and maybe even see the error of her ways." He undertook the experiment *without knowing what the outcome would be*, just like a scientist working in a lab. He may have had an hypothesis about what would happen, but until he conducted the experiment, he wouldn't know whether his hypothesis was correct. He acted as if because he knew this was one spiritual choice he could make. Now he would watch carefully to see what would happen.

No Loving Action can ever fail, because it is always an experiment, and the only goal of an experiment is to gain new information. When you try a Loving Action in a relationship, maybe you will discover that you feel different inside; maybe your partner will respond more warmly toward you; maybe your partner will become angry and hostile; maybe you will feel worse than you did. Whatever happens, you will have learned something. The more consciously you engage in your experiments and the more carefully you observe the results, the more you will learn. This learning is the substance of spiritual growth.

So again, a Loving Action is a specific unilateral act of will that is motivated by a desire for spiritual growth and undertaken as an experiment, the results of which will be carefully watched and factored into future experiments.

Loving Actions have two functions. First, they give you a taste of what it is like to be a fully evolved spiritual person. Second, they help you to become one. An evolved spiritual person in Lyle's situation would have such a highly developed inner calm and peace of

mind that he would never have been thrown off balance by Wendy's behavior in the first place.

Lyle isn't there yet, but by deliberately adopting spiritual *behavior* as an experiment, he gets to experience something of what it would be like to be a spiritually evolved person. Also, he moves forward in his spiritual journey because his Loving Action is one more effort at spiritual practice. After years of acting as if and engaging in whatever other spiritual practices he is doing, Lyle will have the quiet mind and inner strength that are the goals of spiritual practice.

Loving Actions Require Leadership

Whenever you use a Loving Action, you are voluntarily offering leadership to your relationship.

A leader is someone who agrees to watch over not only his or her own needs but also the needs of everyone in the group and of the group itself. A good leader promotes the goals of the whole group, not just his or her own personal goals, and wants the whole group to succeed. Above all, a leader takes initiative in order to accomplish these goals, both by setting a good example and by supporting each member of the group.

Reread that last paragraph, applying it very specifically to your relationship.

If you are a natural leader, this role will be easy for you. If not, this will be an excellent opportunity to push yourself, to reach outside your comfort zone, and to increase your skills and self-confidence. The Eight Loving Actions will give you specific ways to lead. For now, it is important just to see the concept that using Loving Actions is a form of leadership, which, all by itself, is a substantial contribution to your relationship.

Leadership is not fair. Often the leader has to do extra work. But the leader also receives the satisfaction of guiding the group to

success. How often have you been part of a department or class or committee and had the feeling, “I could have done a much better job of leadership myself!” Here is your chance to do that—in your very own relationship.

If both you and your partner are using Spiritual Partnership together, then you will both be providing leadership at different times. Very often, however, one partner is more inclined to provide it than the other. If you are the one who seems to care more about the quality of your relationship or to experience problems more often, you have the opportunity to make an impact by voluntarily taking a leadership role. Or if you are undertaking Spiritual Partnership by yourself without involving your partner, you can enjoy the role of uncontested voluntary leadership.

Another way to talk about spiritual leadership is that the spiritual leader is the “big” person in any interaction. Being the “big” person means that you voluntarily take the high ground. You make a sacrifice. You say to yourself, “The relationship is more important than whether or not I get my way this time.” You put your ego in the backseat for the time being and don’t worry about being acknowledged for what you do. Being the “big” person may mean that you give up being right or making sure your partner knows you are right. You become more interested in good results for the relationship than in either “winning” or receiving praise.

My friend Erin, who is a real estate agent, was working with a family who found their ideal dream home but felt it was beyond their means. Erin knew that in the current fast-paced market, within a year they would feel they had gotten a bargain, and she encouraged them to stretch their limit. She told me that she quietly gave up her own commission, though the family never realized this.

“I didn’t need the money,” she told me. “And they really needed that home!”

Erin was the “big” person here. She made a sacrifice, an unselfish gesture. She took pleasure in her good deed and didn’t need any recognition for it.

Every time you adopt that attitude in your relationship—and the Loving Actions will help you do it—you will reap enormous rewards.

Being the “big” person means that you avoid getting caught up in the most immediate action and take one step back so that you can see the whole “game” you are a part of. Then you have the choice: simply not playing the game or maybe even inventing an entirely different game. Leadership is the simple switch from, “Why won’t you *talk* to me about this? I really don’t feel we can spend the money!” to “Look, here we are arguing about money again. Let’s go get some ice cream. I’m sure this thing will work itself out.”

Lyle was exercising leadership and being the “big” person when he deliberately decided to act as if he were not angry, even when, inside, he felt anger and frustration.

The great thing about deciding to provide leadership in your relationship is that you gain power—not power over your mate, but inner strength and confidence. You suddenly realize you have far more control over life in your relationship than you had thought.

The Purpose of Love Is to Love

Our culture has not taught us to love openly and freely, and the idea of unilateral acts of love may seem naive and, well, unfair. Because most of us were parented imperfectly and have been through painful “love” experiences in our adult lives, we have few models for spiritually informed love. Instead, we turn to the model we have learned so well in the capitalistic marketplace. We think of our relationships as a contract that has to be fair and have built-in safeguards. We bargain with each other for better results for ourselves.

EXPERIMENT 3**Try Actions Instead of Words**

Even before you have learned any specific Loving Actions, watch for an opportunity in your relationship to act instead of talk. Think of something you want to convey to your sweetheart. Maybe it is a compliment or an appreciation. Maybe it is a request or a complaint or criticism. Now, just for fun, see if you can figure out a way to convey this message with some kind of action instead of words.

In your notebook, write down exactly what you tried and how you felt the experiment worked or didn't work.

But marriage is simply not about gaining or winning, and the rules of the marketplace will never work there. Marriage and loving partnerships are for something else altogether: they are for learning how to give and receive love. That's all. Loving Actions are not bargaining chips. When you offer them freely, with no strings attached, you will experience them in return, no matter what the response from another person is, because you will be experiencing your own strong and loving self.

Suppose you act lovingly, and your partner does not respond in kind. You have still been loving, in accord with your spiritual practice, and your kind, loving behavior is its own reward. Does the Dalai Lama stop behaving with compassion and acceptance because the Chinese still occupy Tibet?

To live in accord with spiritual values is to live by choice and awareness rather than always to be in reaction to the people around you.

Chances are that the marketplace rules of negotiating and communicating have not produced desired results in your relationship anyway. Stop and think for a minute. What is the biggest source of conflict in your relationship? How far have you come in resolving it by using communication?

If you choose to bring your spiritual practice into your relationship, your only question will be, “How well can I love this person?” You are not loving as a strategy to gain certain specific results, but the “results” of love are likely to be richly rewarding.

Behaving lovingly toward your partner is not a vague concept; this book will show you exactly how to do it. For most people, Loving Actions are easier to learn than complex communications skills, and they have much more far reaching and long-lasting effects. The rewards of loving go far beyond the very best you can achieve using the old rules. The couples I studied for my second book, *The Eight Essential Traits of Couples Who Thrive*, were thriving precisely because they focused on loving each other, in a spirit of good will, not in a spirit of “Am I getting my fair share?” While couples around them were busy negotiating with each other, these couples were learning better and better how to love, exactly what you will learn in this book.

Focusing on love rather than on negotiation makes a staggering difference. All the assumptions change; all the rules change; all the ways of measuring results change. You may feel some resistance to this new idea. I will address some of the most common hesitations and questions about it in Chapter Eleven. But the only way to find out whether Spiritual Partnership is right for you is to try it.

So the first major difference between Stage Two relationships and Spiritual Partnership is the change from communication to Loving Actions as the primary method of relationship enrichment and problem solving. Now let’s look at the second major difference.

Difference 2: Your Focal Point Shifts from Your Partner and Your Relationship to Your Own Spiritual Path

Most of us try to solve our relationship problems by using every means possible to persuade our partner to change.

If only you would clean up your messes after you! This is a reasonable request, it's fair, and it's easy for you to do.

Look, I'd like just one compliment a week. Is that too much to ask? Just one time, tell me I look nice or that you enjoyed the meal I prepared.

It isn't fair for you to talk on the phone so much every evening. It leaves no time for us. You've got to find a way to cut down. It's only fair.

There you go criticizing me again. I hate this. Are you ever going to learn that your criticisms hurt me? They will never change me anyway. Just lay off!

Asking your partner to change is the most common relationship problem-solving technique in the world—and the least effective.

Change will happen in your relationship when you use a spiritual approach, but not because you engineer it. It will happen on its own, naturally, not in a forced or artificial way. Change will come from a deep place, and it will endure. When you try to change your partner, you are leaving spirit out of your relationship. Remember what Thomas Moore said: “Slight shifts in imagination have more impact on living than major efforts at change.”

In Chapter Eight, where we discuss the power of acceptance, we will see in detail how change *does* occur within Spiritual Partnerships. For now, we need to see that change does not happen when your focus is on your partner and your problems.

There are two major drawbacks to the age-old technique of trying to change your partner: (1) It doesn't honor your partner, and (2) though it may create a temporary, Band-Aid solution, it will never truly work.

Trying to Change Your Partner Doesn't Honor Your Partner

Each of us has a little flame deep within us. All of life is an effort to keep that flame burning brightly. The flame is our self-love, our inner strength, our happiness and sense of well-being. Every time you interact with your intimate partner, you are either throwing sand on your partner's flame—or breathing fresh oxygen on it to make it glow brighter. A love relationship should be all about brightening and supporting the inner flame of the person you love. We have somehow acquired the illusion that if we throw enough sand and water on our partner's flame in the guise of being “fair” or of offering “suggestions” (usually criticisms) or of insisting on change, we will both end up happier.

Trying to get your partner to change is always a way of dimming his or her flame. It is not supporting or loving. It doesn't honor the precious person your partner has spent all these years becoming and is still trying to become.

Your partner has a right to be sloppy or controlling or absent-minded or workaholic or selfish or habitually late or rude to his parents. These may be personality characteristics that displease you, but your partner doesn't have to change them for you.

For one thing, your partner's “faults” were probably there when you fell in love with this person. Either love blinded you to them, or the very same quality you once loved has transformed itself in your own eyes. What you originally saw as generosity,

you now see as careless spending. What you originally saw as strength, you now see as arrogance. The iconoclasm you loved now seems weird to you. The ambition you so admired has turned into workaholism, or the free spirit you adored has now become a lack of ambition.

Your partner has personality tendencies, a family history, and difficult past experiences. He or she didn't just spring from whole cloth, ready to satisfy your images of love. Your partner has images too, and has a right to those.

Women often want more expressions of affection and affirmation from men. They want to feel more adored and to experience more intimate moments.

Men's ideal is often the precise opposite of this. Men love to relax into a relationship and not feel they always have to be taking care of it. They like "parallel play," relaxing together while they both are reading, or puttering in the garage knowing their loved one is inside on the computer.

You have a right to what you want, but so does your partner. So you may not end up with everything you want. This is not a problem; it's a fact of life. Badgering your partner to change will only create discord, upset, and distance between the two of you. It is the opposite of loving, honoring, and supporting this person you love.

Trying to Change Your Partner Will Never Be Effective

When you keep mentioning that your partner is late or sloppy or inattentive, or even if you negotiate constructively and sweetly for change, the message you are conveying to your partner is, "You are not quite good enough the way you are. I would love you more if you would change." So your partner's experience is, "I'm being assaulted, criticized."

It is actually a *healthy response* for your partner to feel inside, “I’m not a bad person. I’m fine just the way I am. I love myself, even if you can’t love me the way I am.”

When you criticize a relatively healthy person, you actually trigger that person’s self-protective instincts and probably make the person even more likely to behave in the way you don’t like, whether this reflex is conscious or unconscious. If you have a partner who acquiesces to your every desire and never stands up for himself or herself, then you have an even worse problem. You should be grateful for a partner who is trying to maintain personal integrity in the face of your criticisms or requests for change.

“But,” you may say, “I’m trying to persuade my partner to be more organized or more thoughtful or more competent *because I know it would be better for him or her*, as well as better for the relationship. I’m trying to be helpful!”

Help is help only when it is perceived as help.

A person is not likely to change a deeply rooted personality trait for you. If the trait is something your partner doesn’t like in herself or himself, then the more you convey your love and create an atmosphere of acceptance, the safer your partner will feel to risk experimenting with changes. Change happens when you accept and support your partner, not when you criticize. We will see many examples of changes taking place in an atmosphere of support as we discuss specific Loving Actions.

To reiterate then, trying to solve a problem by getting your partner to change doesn’t honor your partner and doesn’t work. Nevertheless, most couples keep trying to change each other for years and years, because it is the only thing they can think of to do.

Spiritual Partnership invites you to try something entirely different.

Spiritual Partnership Suggests a Different Focus

In Spiritual Partnership, you stop putting attention on your partner and start putting it on yourself. Your actions arise out of your own desire to become a more spiritually developed person. In Spiritual Partnership, relationship work is inner work.

Always view your relationship as an opportunity for you to move toward the spiritual person you would like to be: to become more connected with your true self, more connected with your partner, more authentic, and more loving.

In Spiritual Partnership, you are not asking, “How can I resolve this problem? How can I get my needs met here? How can I convey what I need to my partner?” Rather, the question is always, “If I am going to behave in accord with my highest spiritual self, what will I do right now?” The Eight Loving Actions will offer you some very specific answers to that question.

In Spiritual Partnership, it doesn't matter what is going on with your partner; it matters only how *you respond* to what is going on with your partner. Your work is to pay attention to yourself, to learn what you can about yourself, and then to provide spiritual loving leadership. When you use this approach, you will automatically move both yourself and your relationship forward.

“This Is About Me”

In one of my groups of eight people, Sharon became very annoyed with Tim, a man in the group who was not her partner. Tim was an advanced student of yoga. He talked about yoga all the time and even sat in our group in yoga positions. Sharon felt that he was “showing off” and that his self-centered behavior was disruptive to our group. She wanted to get him to look at his inappropriate behavior, and she thought the rest of us should join her in this effort.

However, every time Sharon spoke to Tim about his yoga, I would say to her, “Sharon, where is your charge about this coming from?” I would invite her to look at exactly what her feelings of annoyance were and to see what she could learn about herself from this irritation. Sharon hated my interventions; she wanted me and the group to support her in conveying to Tim that he was insensitive and arrogant. But we all helped her see that Tim had a right to be who he was and that Sharon’s feelings were offering her an opportunity to learn something *about herself*. Why did she find his behavior to be so upsetting? “This is not about Tim,” I would tell Sharon. “This is about you.”

It took Sharon several weeks to understand what I meant when I said, “Sharon, this is about you.” In her view, Tim was being glaringly disruptive.

Gradually, as Sharon became willing to look at the reason for her upset, it developed that she had practiced yoga herself in the past, but had let her practice lapse and felt pangs of regret about it. Tim was evoking this regret. When Sharon discovered how strong her regrets were, she found a way to fit yoga back into her schedule.

Whenever you find yourself annoyed with your partner, remember the phrase, “This is about me.” As a Spiritual Partner, you want to ask not, “Why is my partner doing this dumb thing?” but rather, “Why do I have such strong feelings about what my partner is doing? Where does this big ‘charge’ in me come from? What can I learn about myself from this incident?”

The way to “fix” whatever you don’t like in your relationship is to stop worrying about what your partner is or isn’t doing, and go within. The answers to your conflicts, to your longings and dissatisfactions, are not out there in someone else or some other situation. Everything you need for peace and happiness is within you, and that is where your relationship work has to start.

EXPERIMENT 4**This Is About Me**

Think of something your partner did that annoyed you, an incident where you clearly felt your partner was insensitive or thoughtless.

Now, just as an exercise, try to think of any small way in which you might have contributed to this incident. What was your role?

This can be a powerful experiment. Take it seriously and take your time with it. Write about it in your journal or talk with a friend.

“If you focus only on yourself all the time, isn’t that pretty self-ish and self-centered?” someone once asked me.

Spiritual attention to self, which moves you toward connection with yourself and with others and toward authenticity, is completely different from inappropriate selfishness, self-involvement, or narcissism, all of which lead away from connection and authenticity. When you pay spiritual attention to yourself, this should not be apparent to other people. Paying attention to your own spiritual journey leads you in the direction of love. It means that you stay aware of your highest spiritual aspirations and act out of them.

... [I]f you take good care of yourself, you help everyone. You stop being a source of suffering to the world, and you become a reservoir of joy and freshness. Here and there are people who know how to take good care of themselves, who live joyfully and happily. They are our strongest support. Everything they do, they do for everyone.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

A deeply held belief in this society is that relationships are hard work. Many people experience this to be true. What's sad is that most people spend their whole lives doing the *wrong hard work*, trying either to change or to put up with their partner. This is futile and frustrating hard work. Becoming spiritual, waking up to your true self and your deepest desires, learning how to operate from love and empathy—*that* is hard work, but it leads somewhere! It takes you beyond the hard work! It is the kind of hard work that is enormously satisfying and that makes your relationship into the one you wanted in the first place.

Spiritual Partnership is learning how to do the *right kind* of hard work! The “work” is on your own spiritual path, your own journey to connection, authenticity, love, and inner peace. And as a bonus, your work on that journey will enhance your relationship more than anything else you can do.

Your Relationship as a Spiritual Practice

We are not used to thinking of our relationships as a spiritual practice. When we think of a spiritual practice, we usually mean something like meditation, prayer, religious practice, reading of sacred scriptures, journal writing, dream work, or developing a connection with a spiritual teacher.

The supposition throughout this book is that you can make your relationship itself an active part of your spiritual practice. If you already have a spiritual practice, you are invited to add this to it; if not, your relationship is a fine place to begin a spiritual practice. Just as you might learn how to meditate and then engage in the “practice” of meditating for many years, in this book, you will learn about Spiritual Partnership and be invited to practice it for many

EXPERIMENT 5
On Changing Your Partner

1. Look back at the list you made below the line in Experiment 1, the problem areas in your relationship. Choose one problem.
2. First, in your journal, write a sentence or two about how this problem could be eliminated if your partner would be willing to change.
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “Never happen” and 10 being “Extremely likely,” give the scenario you wrote in point 2 a number that expresses how likely it is that your partner will change in this way.
4. Now, with regard to this same problem, write, “The reason I react so strongly to [your partner]’s behavior is _____.”
5. Assume that your partner will never change with regard to this behavior. Do you think you could ever change your reaction to this behavior? Explain your answer.

years. With meditation, Spiritual Partnership, or any other spiritual practice, all along the way you will learn more about yourself and your relationship to the divine, discover your resistance to spiritual growth and move through that resistance, and ultimately become a happier and more loving person.

Relationship is probably the most powerful spiritual path that exists in the world today. It’s the greatest tool that we have. Our relationships can be the fastest and the most powerful route to the deepest truth, if we know how to use them.

—Shakti Gawain

Some spiritual groups create special circumstances to help them focus their spiritual practice. For example, the San Francisco Zen Center maintains a mountain retreat center where students are invited to become part of the staff. As they clean the rooms, garden, prepare meals, and put fresh flowers everywhere, they are “practicing” being mindful and reverent. I know of a Gurdjieff study group whose members volunteer in a high-stress kitchen for long hours on “practice” weekends so that together they can pay close attention to the feelings and behavior that this stress evokes.

Many families use the common spiritual practice of pausing for a moment of gratitude before eating. One woman told me she asks each of the children in her soccer carpool to say what they learned in practice that day and what they hope to improve on at the next practice. This is a way of making the soccer game a form of “spiritual practice”—that is, playing soccer with a specific intention to move toward self-improvement.

Spiritual Partnership is simply the act of treating your relationship as a real-life laboratory for spiritual practice. Your relationship evokes certain emotions and behavior that you can pay attention to and learn from. In improving your effort to “do” your relationship in accord with spiritual values, you will automatically be improving your relationship.

The term *practice* has a dual meaning when used in the phrase *spiritual practice*. It means vocation or way of life, the way a doctor practices medicine. But it also means learning by doing. If you practice being loving, nonjudgmental, accepting, and forgiving in all of your life, then when you are faced with a difficult situation, you will be more likely to respond in a spiritual way, because you will be practiced.

One advantage of using your relationship as a spiritual practice is that it does not require extra time; instead, it means making small

changes, one at a time, in activities that you are already doing every day. You won't have to set aside several hours for you and your partner to do contrived exercises. There are no long written questionnaires, no self-tests. Except for a few experiments I will suggest from time to time that might involve meditation or journal writing, you won't need to set aside extra time every day. You will need discipline, but not the kind that takes extra time.

Spiritual Partnership can change your relationship very quickly. Most couples experience positive changes as soon as they decide to practice it in a deliberate way. The *spiritual* goals of your journey—such as deep self-knowledge or an expanded capacity for compassion and forgiveness—may be achieved gradually over many months and years, but wonderful changes in your *relationship* are likely to appear right away.

Spiritual Partnership at Work: Karen and Al

Karen and Al were in love and had a solid relationship, but a big problem was beginning to undermine all of this: since Karen got a troublesome new boss, Al kept trying to convince her to quit her job.

When Karen came home at night, exasperated and wanting to tell Al the outrageous things this new boss had done, Al wouldn't listen. Instead, he also became critical of Karen.

"You just lack the courage to make a change," he would tell her. "Don't be so afraid. Just leave. This company doesn't own you. Take a break. Get back to the writing you're so eager to do."

Karen didn't agree that they could manage without her income, even for a short while, and there was much that she valued about her job. At first, Karen and Al carefully tried to use all the communication techniques they had learned. But Karen was better at using them than Al was, and she would become furious when Al, although he was trying hard, didn't listen, wouldn't accurately reflect back

what she had said, interrupted her, and made “you” statements instead of “I” statements. Now they were arguing, not only about the job but also about their communication process! And they each seemed to become more deeply entrenched in their positions.

Al had heard about one of my ongoing groups and decided to learn about Spiritual Partnership. When he arrived at the first group, he felt angry and stuck. He thought that he was being truly supportive of Karen and had no idea how to proceed.

I suggested to Al that he experiment with the spiritual practice of using restraint, the fourth Loving Action, which we will learn in Chapter Five. He made a pact with himself that for two weeks, he would refrain from making any negative, critical, or demanding comments to Karen.

After one week, he returned to the group with this report:

The atmosphere in our house changed completely overnight. At first, we were just quiet. About the third day, I was struck with the realization that, while I had been blaming Karen for all of our recent problems, in fact I was the cause of all the upset. When I simply didn't say anything, the arguing disappeared. I still thought she was wrong, but we were being nice to each other again. We both loved this.

Over the next weeks, as Al began to use several other Loving Actions, such as acting as if, acting alone, practicing acceptance, and practicing compassion, he had a second major insight: he saw that Karen had a right to her position. He moved from thinking that Karen was wrong to seeing that both of their points of view might have validity. This too was a revelation to him.

As Al practiced compassion (Loving Action 8), again over a period of weeks, he began to look behind Karen's position to the

person Karen was. He realized that Karen's father had quit a job once, catapulting the family into a period of poverty and chaos. He saw that security was an extremely high priority for Karen. He began to feel compassion for her and to accept that she was doing what was right *for her*. As a deliberate act of will, he stopped making any suggestions to her about her work life.

The epilogue to this story is that, after eighteen months, Karen was promoted to take the place of the boss who caused her so much trouble. She created flex-time scheduling for her whole department, allowing her to work four days instead of five, and she rented a small cabin to use as a writing studio, where she unfailingly spent that fifth day every week.

When Al began to focus on his own spiritual behavior and stopped trying to solve the problem, the distance that had threatened Karen and Al's happiness was gone.

Which Comes First: Spirituality or Relationship?

I am often asked this question: In Spiritual Partnership, which is more important: each individual's spiritual growth, or the relationship? Which comes first? The answer is, the two are so intertwined that it doesn't matter.

For example, one of the Loving Actions we will learn is to practice restraint, as Al did. If your partner yells at you and you can think quickly enough to be quiet and then to respond later in a non-defensive way, you will have put a spiritual value into use at the same time that you will have made your relationship a more pleasant place to be. Your relationship gave you a chance to act spiritually, to nourish your soul; and your spirituality gave you a chance to improve your relationship—both at the same time.

So, in your own mind, view your relationship as a way to work on your spiritual life, *or* think of your spiritual life as a way to

work on your relationship, whichever works for you. In Spiritual Partnership, love and spiritual growth support each other.

Why Is Relationship a Good Place to Practice Spirituality?

In a rousing presentation I was fortunate to attend, the spiritual writer Iyanla Vanzant told us, “If you want to test your spirituality, fall in love. You can be as spiritual as Buddha when you are by yourself.”

Relationship is an excellent place to practice spiritual values because you can be certain that they will be tested there. It is in your relationship that you are most likely to feel isolated, to revert to the worst aspects of your personality, and to experience anger, fear, and confusion. So, right then and there, you will have an opportunity to work on these spiritual challenges. Close relationships tend to magnify both your strong and weak points, so you can get a really good look at yourself if you are paying attention. And you can watch your spiritual “experiments” actually making a difference.

Spirituality is not more and more principles you learn; it is a quality you gradually achieve. Nowhere is it more satisfying to achieve that quality than in your relationships with the people you love.

How Spiritual Practice Deepens Connection

If relationship provides a perfect opportunity to practice spirituality, the reverse is also true: a more spiritual you will be able to practice relationship at its very finest. Your soul has the power to love far, far beyond what your personality is capable of. The more attention you pay to your soul—that is, the more you are motivated by your deepest inner stirrings—and the more you become your most authentic self, *the more you will be able to connect with your partner at a deep level.*

Often it is a relationship itself that brings you in touch with your authentic self. When you invest yourself in a person and pin hopes

and dreams on a certain relationship, you are automatically making yourself vulnerable. It is in the nature of love that you become dependent on your lover in certain ways. Even though a certain amount of dependency is completely healthy and normal, it can be frightening. This fear is part of the authentic you. Don't run from it because it feels strange and unpleasant; welcome it. Vulnerability always presents you with an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The you that is more real and less "conditioned" almost always feels vulnerable when it first comes out after being buried for a long time. First you feel the vulnerability, the fear, the shame, the sadness. But if you are part of any relationship in which you can experience being fully accepted and loved for the person you truly are, vulnerability and all, you will get to experience the profound pleasure of relaxing into your real, unadorned self. In that state, you are totally lovable. Others are likely to be drawn to you, to feel love for you, and to feel deeply connected.

Now imagine having an experience like that with someone you already love. Locating and then sharing your deepest pockets of fears, regrets, low self-esteem, or shame requires courage, but it moves you toward greater authenticity and deeper connection with the one you love.

So relationships are a good place for you to focus on your spiritual journey because they give you concrete opportunities to become more authentic. And the relationship you will create as a result of your spiritual work will be deep and genuine.

A Quick Recap

Let's review what we have said in this overview of Spiritual Partnership.

1. Many couples are ready to move to a new level of intimate partnership because humanity has progressed to a point where we are aware of spiritual values and have the option of operating from them. (That much of the world is engaged in a rebellion against spiritual development does not change the fact that these frontiers have been opened up and are being richly explored by many.) Many couples are ready for Stage Three relationships, or Spiritual Partnership.

2. Spiritual Partnership will build on and expand the fairness, equality, and good communication that are the ideal of Stage Two relationships.

3. Two fundamental differences separate Stage Two relationships from Spiritual Partnership.

4. The first difference is the move from communication to Loving Actions as the primary tool for conflict resolution and relationship growth. We looked at four limitations of communication as the only tool available to couples. We learned that a Loving Action is a specific unilateral act of will that is motivated by a desire for spiritual growth and undertaken as an experiment, and that the use of Loving Actions requires a willingness to take a leadership role in a relationship. And we saw why it is important to move beyond communication and negotiation in our love relationships, because this model of relating is based on the values that govern the marketplace, whereas love is a different universe altogether. The purpose of love is to learn better and better how to give and receive love, and love is its own reward.

5. The second difference separating Stage Two relationships from Spiritual Partnership is the shift of focus from trying to change your partner and your relationship to gently coaxing yourself to change by paying attention to your own spiritual aspirations. As a Spiritual Partner, you view your relationship as a spiritual practice,

an opportunity to put your spiritual values to work minute by minute, day by day. You are always asking, “If I am operating in accord with my highest spiritual values, what will I do now?” These spiritual values include moving away from separation, habit, fear, limited awareness, control, and restlessness, and moving toward connection, choice, authenticity, love, consciousness, surrender, and inner peace.

EXPERIMENT 6



First Impressions

In your journal, write your answers to these questions, or discuss them with your partner or a friend.

1. After reading only this chapter, what appeals to you about Spiritual Partnership?
2. What questions or skeptical thoughts do you have about it?
3. What does not appeal to you?

Now we are ready to learn the Eight Loving Actions that will give you highly specific, easy-to-use experiments that automatically guide you to behave in accord with spiritual values. Let's begin the journey!