

Marriage as our Spiritual Practice

Debby Gullery
April 2017



When I was blessed in marriage in 1982, Father told us that our spouses would become our second messiahs and our children would become our third messiahs. I'm not sure that we understood what Father was trying to convey to us at the time, but my thirty-four years of marriage and my training as a marriage educator and relationship coach have helped me to uncover the true meaning of his words. I believe that Father was trying to tell us that our most important spiritual and emotional growth would take place in our spousal and parenting relationships.

Family, the school of love: We have heard this so many times, but most of us understood it to mean that as parents, we needed to create a heavenly environment to enable our children to learn to love. What many of us missed, however, is that family continues to be the school of love for all of

us, no matter our age or what stage we are in.

The New Age author Shakti Gawain said, "Relationship is probably the most powerful spiritual path that exists in the world today. It's the greatest tool that we have." It makes sense, then, that in our marriages is where we find the best opportunities to develop our capacity to love. Spiritual growth is hard. We would all prefer to see ourselves as loving people, who care about the providence and the suffering heart of God.

We can even convince ourselves that we are very spiritual because we pray and study regularly, but the truth is that we only see where we are really at through our most important relationships. Loving the world is so much easier to do than loving a husband who is snoring on the couch or a wife who is nagging about the dishes. But it is precisely with these people, at these moments, that we can clearly see just how loving, how forgiving, how kind and how accepting we really are. This is why it's not while in the prayer room or on the yoga mat that we see ourselves most honestly. It is instead when another person confronts us with expectations or needs that require our investment and effort to meet. It is in a thousand big and little choices we make all day long. In this sense, our spouses are like mirrors, reflecting back to us the best and the worst in ourselves. With our spouses, we have many opportunities each day to see how willing and capable we are in terms of loving and respecting each other.

Marriage as a spiritual discipline

What would it be like if we saw our marriages (and families) as the actual path to our wholeness? What might happen if we saw marriage and parenting as transformative practices? If we looked at these relationships as central to our spiritual growth, we might be inclined to pay more attention to our own actions and attitudes. We might actually treat our partners and children with more care and loving kindness.

So how do we begin this process of recognizing and treating our marriages and families as our spiritual practice? Well, first we need to become intentional about our growth in general. Spiritual growth doesn't happen automatically -- we have to invest in it and work at it.

On the most basic level, spiritual practice is about changing our bad habits, overcoming our laziness, keeping ourselves motivated, and choosing awareness and intentionality. To become good at anything, we have to practice it. In terms of relationships, this means we have to practice giving, even when we don't feel like giving.

Most of us know what we should do in any given moment. The challenge, of course, is to do the right thing. The biggest challenge is that the things we want the most, like connection and intimacy, require huge amounts of honesty and courage. To truly live life well and to build a marriage and family with our core values at the center, requires tremendous vulnerability and courage!

Growing within the relationship

Marriage is an excellent place for us to develop our capacity for loving, because a good marriage requires commitment to constant personal change. We do not have to be stuck in the dysfunctional behavior we may have learned as children. We always have the ability to change patterns that are detrimental to our marriage. As a matter of fact, this is an essential part of our commitment to each other.

When we approach our marriages in this way, we find ourselves becoming true spiritual partners. As spiritual partners, we want to choose daily to look out for the well-being of our spouses and to find ways to enrich and enhance their lives. This requires real investment of time and energy. In this way, our capacity for loving well becomes the true measure of our spirituality. We are meant to learn the basics for building loving relationships within our families of origin.

On this foundation, we mature (somewhat) and commit ourselves to another person. It is in this unique and committed relationship that the next wave of our most significant internal growth takes place, precisely because our spouses are always there to reflect our strengths and weaknesses back to us. Doesn't this make sense? God wants us to be his channel for expressing love to our spouses. It's part of our job description!

This is why our spirituality cannot -- and does not -- exist separately from our marriages. They deeply intertwine, whether we recognize it or not. As spiritual beings who are married, we want to strive for intentionality, restraint and appreciation of each other's perspectives and to work actively at providing support, validation and love to our spouses and children. In this very practical and concrete way, consciously investing into the improvement of our marriages and families naturally becomes part of our daily spiritual practice and helps us to move closer toward the spiritual people we're striving to become.