

Spiritual Intimacy

Soulful Connections

Don't let these 4 myths about spiritual intimacy keep you and your spouse apart.

Although I'm not keen on stereotypes, I can't help noticing how women and men gravitate toward certain gender outlooks. For instance, consider men's and women's TV watching preferences. While I stubbornly cling to the hope that my wife, Valerie, will eventually be captured by the magic of ESPN (Da Bears!) and give up her pathetic addiction to HGTV ("all for under \$500!"), the reality is we continue to be a two television family. We are not the same. I'm guessing that before the ink is dry on the marriage license most couples discover a gender gap or two in their relationship.

But of all the possible gaps between husbands and wives there's no difference more puzzling to me than how women and men approach spirituality. Here's a scenario Valerie and I have experienced a dozen times: We're with a group of married couples when the topic of spirituality comes up. Someone, usually a woman, mentions the importance of spiritual intimacy in a strong marriage.

The difference in response to the words *spiritual intimacy* is nearly polar. The women become alert. They hone in on the topic with a kind of female soul radar. Immediately they become engaged. The men's response? Suddenly even the most verbal among them becomes passive and quiet. If they're willing to make eye contact at all, they're reminiscent of a deer caught in the headlights just before an accident. Perspiration beads on foreheads, arms cross, tongues become mute and stay mute until the topic changes.

What's up with that? How could those two little words, *spiritual intimacy*, evoke such different responses—anxiety in husbands, and longing in wives?

I've come to believe that these respective responses are rooted in wives' sense of disappointment and husbands' sense of inadequacy. I don't think spiritual intimacy was suppose to have that effect—to divide and separate us. What are we doing wrong?

Perhaps this divide reflects some false assumptions. Myths about spiritual intimacy that appear to promote closeness, in actuality may be driving Christian husbands and wives away from each other. Consider this: if we could debunk these myths, we'd undoubtedly discover that spiritual intimacy is one of the best perks God offers married couples.

Couples who travel together spiritually discover an amazing truth—experiencing spiritual intimacy makes everything better. Life is less overwhelming, sex is better, stress becomes more manageable, and problems (which will always exist in some form) are more apt to be tackled as a team. Spiritually intimate couples discover they have more in common on the soul level than any division the gender gap creates on the surface of their lives.

But how do we get that close? Most couples realize that skimming the surface of each other's lives won't connect them spiritually. Somehow the souls must become engaged. So what exactly is this soul engagement called spiritual intimacy? Our definition: *Spiritual intimacy is the satisfying connectedness that occurs when a husband and wife learn to access God and experience him together on the deepest levels.* Notice the absence of a checklist, 10-step process, devotional to-do list, or self-assessment tool. Putting it simply, spiritual intimacy is about *relationship*—a three-way relationship that's in process of growing together as each spouse grows closer to God.

With that definition in mind, let's debunk four myths about spirituality that keep couples from forming satisfying, soulful connections.

Myth 1

Spiritual intimacy must be initiated by the husband.

Some of the saddest women Valerie and I meet are wives who confide that their husbands aren't the spiritual leaders in their homes. Sometimes they describe husbands who are actually opposed to God. Or they may be living with a man who deliberately avoids spiritual intimacy because she desires it so strongly. These difficult relationships make for extreme frustration and intentional heartbreak.

But at other times we get a sense that the husbands some women are so disappointed in are basically good Christian men. They provide for their families, are engaged in loving relationships with their children, and honor their marriage vows, but the problem is they don't initiate spiritual talk in the home. While these wives desire spiritual intimacy, they continue to wait for their husband to fulfill the "initiator's role."

Can I be real here? Isn't it sad that these good men are devalued because they lack the ability, time, or intuition for spiritual sharing? Is it right that these good husbands and fathers—providers, companions, godly-living men—become "awful-ized" because they don't initiate?

Since when was it spiritually illegal for a wife to read a passage from a book to her husband? Why should she withhold an interesting thought from her spouse when she can pass it along? It's natural to want to hear his thoughts and discuss spiritual life together. If the woman is more inclined to be the reader or the more contemplative one in a marriage, why should she deny her wiring and become frustrated for the sake of a marriage model that's idealistic, to say the least? Moving toward a spiritually intimate marriage still counts even if the wife picks up the book from the bookstore and brings it home to her husband.

It also counts if he reads only the parts she's highlighted! In fact, it's still building toward spiritual intimacy if she does all the research for the short-term missions trip, follows through on the plans, and he shows up just in time to catch the plane! The goal isn't initiation on the husband's part. The goal is a closer mutual walk with God. The author of Hebrews writes: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (10:24). Participation is what counts, even if the wife had the original idea.

Myth 2

Spiritual intimacy is all about doing devotions together.

This is probably the assumption that scares a man the most—especially if devotions on his own haven't been easy. I remember being bowled over when I first realized that, like us, many ministering couples haven't been successful at shared devotions. We thought we were the only "professional couple" who struggled with shared devotional life. Talk about a guilt-inducing topic! But let's get past the guilt feelings and look more closely at the idea of a mutual "devotional" life.

Having quiet times together, praying, and reading the Bible may or may not bring a couple closer together. Hearts can go through the motions, minds can employ the methods, while the relationship stays distant. Having a shared devotional life is an approach or methodology—and methods aren't the goal of spiritual intimacy. Instead of thinking of devotional life as the standard benchmark or the "end all," it could be viewed as one effective road that's proven useful to many couples who are traveling together toward God. The good news is that if you struggle with "doing devotions" together, there are many other methods that can stimulate spiritual intimacy in marriage.

Active couples may feel closer to God and each other by prayer walking together. The goal of prayer walking is to care for body and soul simultaneously as you pray back and forth (with eyes open!), or sing, or even recite Scripture that builds each other's faith. Exercising in this fashion can produce spiritual intimacy—it's just a different approach. Other couples who enjoy nature may benefit from what Valerie and I call an "Ah, God! weekend." The purpose of such a weekend is to soak in God's awesome world, to slow down enough to put your arms around each other, and to praise God for all that the eyes of your souls can absorb. This too can lead to spiritual intimacy! Only the method has changed.

Other ways to be spiritually intimate might include activities such as serving on a short-term mission team, taking an historical trip and being amazed by God's hand in the story of our world, or keeping a gratitude journal together. Spiritual intimacy, the greatest benefit of living together as husband and wife, should never be dull or narrowly interpreted!

While exploring new ways to access God can be stimulating (and guilt reducing!), I still encourage couples not to overlook devotional life as a time-proven approach to God. Think of it like classical music—an acquired taste, but one that's worth learning.

Myth 3

Spiritual intimacy is about finding your soul mate.

Who doesn't long for a soul mate—someone whose heart beats as one with yours, someone who's completely understanding and agrees at every point, someone to whom you can be perfectly and deeply connected?

Here's how Thomas Moore's best-selling book, [Soul Mates](#), defines a soul mate: "Someone to whom we feel profoundly connected, as though the communicating and communing that take place between us were not the product of intentional effort, but rather a divine grace. This kind of relationship is so important to the soul that many have said there is nothing more precious in life."

No wonder grown men shake with fear when this expectation is placed on marriage! Unfortunately, this cherished myth of total connectedness at all times is a romantic and secular concept that's floated into our thinking about Christian marriage. The Bible never promotes this expectation. Rather, Scripture teaches that our soul mate is not our human marriage partner. Total connectedness, total understanding, and total love come from God and God alone! Scripture tells us: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"(Deuteronomy 6:5). As much as we may long for the Garden of Eden, the reality is, we can't have the garden without God. Only when we access the unconditional love of God can we love our spouse with soulful love.

Experiencing spiritual intimacy includes a lifetime learning curve. It cannot be shortcut or spontaneously combusted. The "two shall become one" of Scripture is a picture of spiritual connecting that covers a couple's individuality and melds them together. Contrary to popular thought, it isn't a couple's similarities that make them whole, but the "twoness," the differences, the separateness, the unique blending of two personalities together. It's the process of working out the differences in marriage that melds a couple together. We need each other's differences! Here's the real miracle—that two unique individuals can be blended into one whole while maintaining individuality. Christian couples must relinquish the expectations for soul mating in order to become authentically intimate.

Myth 4

Spiritual intimacy will make our relationship problem-free.

Spiritual intimacy will not clear your relationship of all its personal problems. Spiritually close couples can still drive each other crazy even while they're praying and sharing spiritual life. In his book [The Marriage Builder: A Blueprint for Couples and Counselors](#), author Larry Crabb addresses the problem this way: "No matter how intimate their relationship, or how firm their commitment, all married people find their mates annoying or maddening at times. So how is one to accept, not just endure, an ill-mannered or irritating spouse? The Bible requires that we do more, far more, than tolerate each other. We are instructed to accept each other as God accepts us. We are to forbear one another in love, and this involves something different from putting up with our mates with a resigned sigh. Somehow we are supposed to accept each other."

Even though we may hope for change in the one we love, the goal of spiritual intimacy isn't spousal change. The goal of spiritual intimacy is to move couples beyond lifetime tolerators to lifetime lovers. This means that though some relational problems may continue to exist, the ability to love with God's unconditional love is being formed in each partner's heart.

Even the best marriages can have some pretty rough spots. Human love can run dry. But God can restore us to himself and to each other. At such times, couples can put their hope in God. After 34 years of marriage, Valerie and I can say that God has always shown up with his love when our human love has run out. He's good—even when we aren't!

William Temple, past Archbishop of Canterbury, offers some practical insight for couples who've committed not to skim spiritually—with God or with each other: "Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purification of the imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose."

Based on Temple's observation about worship, here are five focusing questions couples can ask to discover satisfying ways to connect with God and each other:

1. What could we do as a couple to surrender to God our entire nature—not just our heads? What specifically causes us to submit our emotions, our energies, and our relationship—all of ourselves to God?
2. What increases our sensitivity to sin and makes us more keenly aware of God's holiness?
3. What expands our minds to God's truth? What nourishes our thinking and turns us into seekers of God's truth?
4. What creative activity opens us to beauty, to love—especially the love of God?
5. What motivates us to seek God's will for our lives above all else?

Discussing questions like these, acknowledging our differences, and engaging our hearts and minds in discovering God together through a variety of ways will move us toward spiritual intimacy. Couples who think outside the box—are willing to examine their lives and debunk the myths—may find that the gender gap closes. The dullness of an "ought and should" approach to spiritual life together can be replaced with a satisfying connectedness.

Steve Bell is co-author of [Made to Be Loved: Enjoying Spiritual Intimacy with God and Your Spouse](#) (Moody Press).

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