

**Marriage as a Spiritual Path**  
**NUCS Reflection May 15, 2016**  
**Tim Traver and Delia Clark**

*Voices:* **Tim** **Delia**

**Hi I'm Tim Traver**

**And I'm Delia Clark, and we're going to offer you a reflection in two voices.**

**We're so happy to be here with you in this lovely space to share our thoughts on marriage and committed relationships as a spiritual path. Here in Woodstock in mid-May I always feel we live in paradise.**

**Marriage is on our minds these days. Our 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary is a week away. Two of our children, Mollie and Toben, are engaged, and Mollie will be married in this space in June. Our daughter Kalmia is in the midst of the challenging process of "conscious uncoupling" from her mate of twelve years.**

**I don't know about you but it seems everyone is talking about marriage and committed relationship now on the radio. A recent TED talk on long marriages as a management problem and Laura Knoy on NHPR on the new social data on marriage – who is getting married and why. Marriage is still popular but it seems financial stability comes first.**

**We came up with the title of our talk – Marriage as a Spiritual Path - spontaneously when we agreed to do a reflection together months back.**

**And then began immediately having some serious doubts.**

**Spiritual Path. Do we even agree about what the word "spirit" means?**

**But the word path.**

**We get that.**

**Marriage has its ups and downs.**

**So does a hiking path.**

**So, what we want to talk about is hiking.**

**Marriage as a spiritual hiking path.... as an opportunity for each of us to advance our spiritual growth by walking together.**

And staying together.

When we got married at a young and foolish age, we didn't know it at the time but the decent hiking boots we splurged on were going to come in very handy.

We had already walked a lot of miles together in places like the White Mountains, the Rocky Mountains and the Green Mountains.

So naturally, that became a central part of the narrative of our life together.

And after we had children we took them walking too.

We walked our children into some very interesting places -- tattoo parlors in Mexico, for instance

... and tropical trails with big snakes and scorpions on them.

And up Mount Kilimanjaro.

The outdoors was a refuge, and we always had some of our most successful times as a family camping, hiking, huddled around fires, cooking out of tin pots, and exploring remote places.

But then the children grew up and left ...

And what are you left with?

At a major time of transition in our life together, ten years ago, when our children were going to college, getting jobs, and leaving home, we realized we had forgotten why it was we got married in the first place.

One of our gaggle of marriage counselors back then ventured that our marriage was shot full of bullet holes.

Thanks.

But, when the going gets tough, the tough go hiking, right?

And so we attempted to walk back into our marriage. Yet another learning opportunity.

A growth opportunity.

So we're going to take you on a walk, a marriage walk along a real path, that offered us a few crystalline moments for reflecting on our own spiritual paths, individually and together.

Along the way, we are hoping to share with you what we see as Seven Opportunities for Spiritual Growth through marriage or committed relationship.

We did our longest marriage walk on the John Muir Trail a few years back.

It's a 211-mile trail along the Pacific Crest in California. The trail is famously scenic. It's the longest stretch of trail in the US without a road crossing. In fact at many points on the trail, any road is a two-day walk away.

The John Muir Trail has many hungry bears. We had multiple close encounters.

But bears were really the least of our concerns. The mind is a much bigger challenge.

The JMT is incredibly up and down. There are ten high passes from its starting point in Yosemite Valley to its end point south at Mount Whitney, the highest point of land in the lower 48. Each pass goes up over at least ten thousand feet, the highest climbs to nearly 14,000. There's no shortage of high pass metaphor on the John Muir Trail.

### **Opportunity #1**

**Listen more; talk less.**

Stated another way: Don't argue on the uphill.

What we found is that long uphill climbs can bring out the best and worst in a relationship. We all have different ways of dealing with the up-hills in life – whether illness, a lost job, a move, a death.

But stressful times are great teachers on the trail.

Don't argue on the up-hills, because you'll be robbing your legs of the energy they need to get up the hill.

You'll be robbing your eyes of the view.

You'll be robbing your partner's attention away from what needs focus.

What's stressing you often needs intense focus. For us that meant being quiet. Focusing on the breath.

On moving the feet forward one step at a time.

If you're going to fight, fight on the down-hills. Fighting is naturally a kind of descent in its own right anyway.

Right.

### **Opportunity #2**

**Accept and love others as they are, not as you wish they were.**

Long walks in the mountains and long marriages test us because walking is fundamentally a matter of style, and we are going to fail if we try to impose our style on our mate's style.

We have to learn to love how the other navigates the world. We have to learn to love what draws them along, feeds their passion, imagination and creative urges.

Delia is drawn to standing on the edges of cliffs. It has to do with a mysterious deep-seated desire for risk taking – which cliff edge scares the bejesus out of me.

Tim likes the rivers, the verdant valleys, especially if he can take a break and go fishing, and then fry those wild fish on shore, eat them, and take a nap.

We test ourselves differently.

In an actual walk across hundreds of miles we have learned to love and depend on our differences.

At the top of our first big pass in the Sierra's, we could see ranges sixty miles away we'd be crossing in a week's time.

That's like seeing Montpelier from Woodstock and then walking there with the High Sierra in the way.

We weren't going to get very far without a total acceptance of who our walking companion was.

### **Opportunity #3**

**Ministering to the others hurts is an excellent framework for spiritual growth.**

We learned to be each other's doctors.

By necessity.

Delia suffered from bad blisters, to the point where she took off her shoes and began walking barefoot or in rubber flip flops. I had to operate on those blisters, treat them nightly to reduce the infection.

I had to deal with Tim's intense muscle cramps and chronic neck pain.

We have found the same to be true in our marriage. We're closest when we let the other take care of us.

Caring for someone else gets us beyond our own needs, and begins to grow our consciousness out to community and planet.

#### **Opportunity #4**

**Find ways to communicate beyond words.**

There are forests in the southern high Sierra where the trees are over 6,000 years old.

Foxtail pines. Bristlecones.

Walking through these ancient groves gave us a new perspective that spoke of mystery and spirit both.

We let go of small concerns.

Somehow, being among those trees allowed us to communicate the enduring nature of our love for one another in ways we had not found in everyday language.

This was also the case for conservation heroes Aldous and Mardy Murie, who have been described waltzing rapturously together in the Alaskan wilderness, with no music except that in their heads.

Tim and Don played two waltzes today to honor that idea.

#### **Opportunity #5**

**Try to stay present in the moment.**

Don't linger in the rear view mirror, or lean too much into hopes for the future.

Day after day of blue skies, enormously vast views, clear blue lakes, we lost even more of the ideas, concerns, issues that had hounded us. Moving on – on the trail – is moving on. Day by day, leaving the past behind.

Never entering the future. Being present to each moment.

Weeks in, your thinking takes on the pace and cadence of your walking.

### **Opportunity #6** **Seek joy and fun**

In walking as in life, it helps to maintain a focus on joy, gratitude and celebration.

Thich Naht Hahn says “Take short steps in complete relaxation. Go slowly with a smile on your lips, with your heart open to an experience of peace... This may be just the beginning of a smile, but keep it on your lips... This half smile not only brings you peace and joy, it also brings peace and joy to people around you.”

We have all kinds of little rituals written into a long walk.

We always bring a book for a third party perspective.

In the Sierra we read Morton Hunt’s *The Natural History of Love*,

...burning the pages each night as we went, to lighten our load. (We also sawed our toothbrushes in half – every ounce counts on aging knees!)

Morton’s book gives you a different kind of long view as it considers romantic love from the Greeks forward through the Victorian age and into the free love of the 1960’s.

### **Opportunity #7** **Trust in the unseen.**

When you transform your small concerns, your jealousies, your hurts in the relationship, when those turn into gratitude and forgiveness of some form, that’s when you really begin to go places.

The feet begin flying along.

Thanks to the “trust of old love,” you begin to feel, as the poet Wendell Berry writes, “safe beyond the bounds of what you know.”

Unafraid.

The feeling of unafraidness, on the trail, or in the marriage, is as a bending of the horizon.

It's not that the world is no longer indifferent or dangerous, it's that you see that there is a place for you in spite of the vast indifference, made in part by your mate, your family, the community, nature.

The horizon bends like the branch of an apple tree heavy with fruit. Each apple a sign, a gift, a symbol revealed.

While walking back into our marriage, we even found that we could understand the meaning of "spirit" in the same way.

So, marriage, and walking together has given us moments of the unfettered mind, and unburdened soul and that's been key to keeping us moving along this path of marriage together and has motivated us to continue to try to create something enduring together.

As we contemplate our coming 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we think about our trail, and the times it came to a crossroads and could have diverged.

Marriages, long term relationships, end often, and as we learned once in this space and as we are seeing now with our daughter, these times of diverging need to be recognized and the relationship honored for all that it has been.

Moving apart can be a powerful spiritual teacher as well as staying together, lessons for moving forward.

But, as Unitarians say, there is no getting around the fundamental reality of unity, even when we go our separate ways.

To borrow from Robert Frost, we walk together, whether together or apart.

Thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to explore our path along with yours.