

Our Spiritual Journeys in a Material World: An Essay for Divorce Professionals

Spirituality is a reverence for the complexity, beauty and wonder of life. It exists in our ongoing search for meaning in our lives, for peace, and for fulfillment in our relationships. It also touches on our ability to balance our sense of morality with a spirit of tolerance.

Our own spiritual journey. Perhaps the best way to describe our path through life is that we are each on a spiritual journey. The thing that makes the journey “spiritual” is our constant search for ways to give *meaning* to our lives, using that word in its transcendent sense. We keep asking ourselves, “Why am I here?” “What is the purpose of my life?” We do this because we want our lives to be in harmony with some greater goal.

Spirituality in a material world. But we live in a world, in a society, where there is far more focus on the material than on the spiritual. Almost none of us could carry on our lives without constant reference to the material world—even if we tried—and very few of us want to try. But many of us still yearn to live a more spiritual life.

Coming to a fork in our life’s. Marital separation and divorce are major life events that can (and should) bring the spiritual and material sides of our lives into sharp focus. These roads take us on a path away from our working life plan. We may have chosen that fork in the road, or it may have been chosen for us, or we may just have found ourselves wandering there. No matter which, both our spiritual path and our focus on the material environment are now open to changes, often major changes.

The professional’s role. And then a divorce professional gets involved. But the professional’s immediate task is not to help two people deal with potential new directions in their spiritual journeys, but rather to help them sort out the existing and coming changes within their material world. Where does the money come from? How do the bills get paid? Where will I live? The main focus is usually on the immediate financial decisions, and then, later, on the longer-term planning for future security.

The goblins are waiting. The spiritual journey thus gets sidelined. When we are going through a marital separation leading to divorce, it isn’t easy to focus on harmony with our life goals. There are emotional goblins to deal with—frustration, fear, confusion, mistrust, anger, and at times even obsession, hate and revenge. These are the enemies of our spirituality. All of these are heavy burdens when we carry them with us on our journeys. For example, anger can be even more of a burden when it is justified, because it’s harder than to move beyond it, even though we know it does us no good to hold on to it.

Finding out sources of strength. The spiritual task of the professional is to help people get back in touch with their better selves. One possible key to that goal is to help the clients reconnect with their most basic sources of strength. Everyone has sources of strength, although they differ from person to person and can be material as well as spiritual. The list of possibilities goes on and on—children, parents, siblings, extended family, close friends, co-workers, teachers, role models, counselors, ministers, work, one’s profession, one’s home, a denominational religion, a sacred text, an AA group, a reading group, a prayer circle, music, art, a hobby, reading, poetry, yoga, family

history, travel, humor, bicycling, walking or jogging, cooking, drama, writing, even our pets, and even, at times, the separated spouse.

Everyone's list is different. And some of these sources of strength can also be sources of "bad vibes," as well (such as frustration or even obsession). The sorting out is for the clients to do on their own time, both as to the priorities in their sources of strength and in focusing on the "good vibes," not the bad ones.

As our material world deteriorates. The problem when spouses separate is that their material situations are more likely to seem worse, not better, at least in regard to matters of income and expenses. Options for the present may have more problems, and the future may appear to be less bright. It's hard to pick up on one's spiritual journey when one is worried about finances.

Can reframing help? Some reframing may be helpful. Remember the lyrics of the old depression era song by the Carter Family, "There's a dark and a weary side of life. There's a bright and a sunny side, too." That doesn't mean to always invite clients into Pollyanna's world, where there is always a bright side to every disappointment. But it does mean using the transitions of divorce as an opportunity to take advantage of both one's fortunate and unfortunate past experiences in making wiser and more practical choices for the future.

Don't forget the material world. The professional's job, of course, is to help the clients find the fairest and most practical ways to preserve and extend their material surroundings for both the present and the future. This is best accomplished when it can be done in a manner that is consistent with the clients' own self-determination. Such a goal is an important touchstone, even though it can't always be achieved.

Refocusing our spiritual journeys. Beyond that, the refocused spiritual journey still takes place post-divorce in the context of the material world. At core, it has to be a spiritual journey, not a material journey. And yet, it's not just the search for a vision of an all-encompassing celestial light, such as Dante tried to describe at the end of *Paradiso*, or a mystical union with God, such as the Sufi dervishes seek to experience.

The stories of our lives, and those of others. Our lives are full of stories that transcend abstractions. So, maybe our spiritual journey can, in part, be a search for stories that teach us and have a spiritual point. We can find these in the four Gospels and the Midrashim, and in the humor of Zen Buddhism and the poetry of Mevlana Jelalu'ddin Rumi, and even in anecdotes about Albert Einstein. Or elsewhere, depending upon the particular religious or secular background each of us possesses.

Thinking about relationships. The stuff of stories is relationships. Our relationship with God may be what we have learned in a church, synagogue, mosque or temple, or it may be based upon an entity that we otherwise try to conceptualize, such as the force that we believe drives the universe, or even the absence of any of these. Or, we can believe, in addition to or in lieu of these, that our relationship with God during our lifetimes mainly plays out in terms of our relationships with other people.

Keeping relationships in our journeys. If we believe that our spiritual journey is more likely to be carried out in human relationships rather than in abstract conceptions of God, then we can let our journey take us to the spiritual side of those relationships. We can seek a broader definition of "family". We can find more things to

respect in other people. We can be more fully in touch with our own spirituality and our sources of strength as we encounter these in others. And we can learn more ways to avoid being judgmental.

Finding the stories that tell us about our paths. As we look for the stories in our own lives, we can also appreciate the stories that other people bring to us. And thereby, we can better help them to get refocused on their new spiritual journeys through the material world of their present and future family finances and security.