

CONTRIBUTION ROMANCE

Start Feeling Great About your Relationships and Your Ability to Connect and be Loving with Anyone!

Relationships are the core of who we are. A connection with someone else consisting of a five-minute conversation can uplift you profoundly to the highest heights or leave you in the lowest lows of despair. One might argue that the quality of your relationships, generally speaking, equals the quality of your life.

So when it comes to loving, intimate relationships, we must ask what, for most people, is missing to make the relationship you're in the relationship of your dreams?

If you are someone who wants to be powerful in a relationship or wants to be in a relationship, this book is for you.

Mostly we'll be talking about romantic relationships, however, almost everything we'll discuss, with a few obvious exceptions, can apply to any type of relationship that you might find yourself throughout your life.

Kirk McDow Louis Brantmeyer

Start Feeling Great About your Relationships and Your Ability to Connect and be Loving with Anyone!



BE THE ONE OTHERS WANT TO BE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH!

Contribution Romance

by Kirk McDow and Louis Brantmeyer

Introduction

Relationships are at the core of who we are. A connection with someone else consisting of a five minute conversation can uplift you profoundly to the highest heights or leave you in the lowest lows of despair. We contend that the quality of your relationships, generally speaking, equals the quality of your life. So when it comes to loving, intimate relationships, we must ask what, for most people, is missing to make the relationship you're in the relationship of your dreams? If you are someone who wants to be powerful in relationship or wants to be in a relationship (because you aren't yet), this book is for you. Mostly we'll be talking about romantic relationships, however almost everything we'll discuss, with a few obvious exceptions, can apply to any type of relationship that you might find yourself in throughout your life.

What is *contribution romance*? Being a person of contribution romance means to consistently choose to practice expressing yourself in thought, action, and being in such a way that you always have your attention on and are taking action to be a contribution to the other person (or persons) you're relating to. I've found that this way of relating to people in the world produces amazing results both in romantic and in other relationships. And in this book, you'll get a rich palette of delicious and effective ways of relating to people.

But first, I'm asking you to willingly suspend your disbelief. No, I don't mean you're about to read a fiction story. I mean that, in order for anything here to make a real difference for you, I need you to *try it on* and leave your disagreements at the door. Try it on the way you'd try on a new suit or a new hat...it might fit, it might not. But trying it out, experimenting with it, seeing how it might fit and tinkering with it - that's *exactly* what you'd *have* to do to see if it *could* fit. And seriously, you should let go of whatever doesn't fit you, but only *after* trying it on fully.

This is also important because I'm not suggesting, for example, that everything I say in this book is truth or even that *any* of it is truth...or that I think that question even matters. What is valuable here is that these are conversations - constructs in language, different ways of looking at these things in life - that have reliably proven to give people access to new ways of being and behaving that benefit them in their relationships. Some of these conversations may even sound like things you've heard before, but I want you to gently set that aside as well because you'll need a real willingness to hear what I'm saying that's different, new, and thus actually *valuable* here.

And it's not just willing suspension of disbelief I'm asking for or willingness to try on what's available in these conversations. It's that you *set an intention* for your use of this book: namely, consider that you've only read this far because there's something important to you in the realm of relationships. Something you're out to make happen that you haven't yet, or maybe something you had but now have lost in your relationship...whatever that is, read on with a specific set intention to have what I say make a difference in *that* particular area.

Also the way this work works, is that whatever breakthroughs you have in your personal relationships will actually make surprising differences in every other part of your life as well, sometimes in ways that seem miraculous

A lot of this will be simple, but not necessarily easy, so don't be overly encouraged or overly dissuaded. Some things will seem simple, but that won't mean it's easy. Other things might seem challenging but that's really because it's new - so if you experience that, don't lose faith and keep practicing. You may be a little clunky at first, so have some patience with yourself.

I'm going to be talking a little bit about gender dynamics, and what I want to make clear is that people are individuals. Many women have masculine characteristics, many men have feminine characteristics, but anybody can be whatever way they want to be regardless of their biological gender. There seem to me to be different tendencies or ways of being that different genders gravitate to *en masse*. There's value in looking at things from the gender point of view from time to time however it's not something I'm treating as a truth (such as "all men are this way" or "women are that way" et cetera)..

Also, while this work is the blending of both our voices (Kirk and Louis), we definitely didn't want it to sound like we were speaking in the royal "we" the whole time, so consider this like a conversation you're having with one person. Where one of us is speaking from our unique experience, we will make that super clear.

A disclaimer: all of the following assumes that you're safe and your well-being is taken care of - nothing in this book is a solution to a situation where you're physically or emotionally unsafe.

Alright, let's begin...

The Problems

So, you have an interest in relationships. The book is focused on personal and romantic relationships, as I said, but mostly everything we talk about will be valuable in any type of relationship, so what I first want to talk about is some of the problems that human beings run into when they're in the pursuit of having a relationship that has everything that they want - whatever that relationship is for you.

First, we're going to talk about what's in the way of people having the relationships that they want. The first and biggest thing that I've observed is that fundamentally, *relationships do not work*. Here's what I mean by that: Just look for yourself... How many couples do you meet and think to yourself, wow, *I want that relationship*... For me it's happened a few times and I have met thousands if not 10s of thousands of couples. I'm just saying it's a rare thing. Then if you look at other types of relationships the same holds true. A lot more relationships don't work than relationships that do work.

Past, Present and Future... If you put one person next to another person, generally neither of them is home. "Home?" you ask. As the reader, look for yourself and try to notice: how much of the time do you spend thinking about your own past - namely, about conversations, events, especially the unfinished argument or unacknowledged transgression or hurtful thing that someone did to you, or the stranger that cut you off in traffic but you just can't let it go, or a regret about a relationship...any of a million different things? You'll notice you spend some percentage of time every day *in the past*. Conversely, you'll notice that you spend some of your time in the future - worrying about how things are *going to be* - like whether someone is going to give you the right answer to a question, or make the decision you want them to make, or if everything is going to turn out the way you expect...we are often in the future in some way, generally as the result of a fear or anxiety about how the future will unfold.

One thing you want to notice is that, every moment you're in the past or the future, you're not in the present. The present is the only time in which something can get done that makes a difference, and especially when it comes to relationships. *Being in the present is the only place you can actually get connected to another human being!* To whatever degree you're not in the present - you're in the past or in the future - you're literally not home. Your body is there, but *you* are someplace else. That's a major stumbling block if you want to be connected or in relationship or partnership with another human being.

There's another challenge - people are listening to everything in life in a particular way and it's generally unnoticed until someone calls attention to it. I'm going to call it Survival Listening™. Essentially, when humans are listening, they are looking for what's wrong. They're looking for the potential threat in what's going on...some examples of how this can show up are: as a judgment of how someone else lives their life, or someone else's career or dietary habits. How this got created was back in the day, human beings are out on the savannah and it's the middle of the night...the tribe hears a twig break and the tribe that was like "Oh it's cool, there's no problem," that tribe got eaten by the lion that broke that twig...whereas the tribe that freaked out every time they heard a twig break - the people who were looking for "something's wrong here" - they survived and lived on, and ended up our ancestors. Thank God they made it, because that's why we're here.

This is not a problem... this *Survival Listening^m*. It's what got us here through generation after generation. However, that listening is not terribly useful in being lovingly connected with another human being. If you are looking at someone or some situation for long enough, asking yourself the question "what's wrong here," you're going to for sure come up with some answers. Nothing and no one can survive the constant barrage of "what's wrong here?" So that's a big reason people have difficulty being powerful in relationships - and by powerful I mean not forceful or manipulative, but rather powerful like having the ability to create the type of relationship they want be in - for example, loving, gracious, creative, whatever you want!

Another problem is pervasive to the *Survival Listening^m*, probably because it also ensured our survival: the fact that that way of listening is all about *me me me*. What can *I* get out of this interaction, what do *I* have to be on the lookout for, can *I* trust this person, why doesn't she care about the impact she's having *on me*? You can begin to hear the problem: when we are obsessively focused on ourselves, it becomes an obstacle for actually connecting to others.

Then, we have another problem. Marketing, I call it. \$183 billion got spent in 2017 in the U.S. alone on marketing. There's 300 million people in the country, so that's *a lot* per person every year spent on marketing! This is kind of scary, because what marketing is, is essentially confusing you about the difference between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure comes from without - the smell of a new car, going to an expensive restaurant, having fine clothes - things outside of you that make you feel good. When you get pleasure, generally you want more. There's a sort of a cyclical quality to it. Happiness, on the other hand, is something much more substantial and fulfilling and is generated from within. Happiness comes from within and is a way of being - it's a choice that people make in life - *to be happy*. And notice, some people are very happy with circumstances that you don't want, and some people are very happy with circumstances that you would love to have. Conversely, there are people who have terrible circumstances that are unhappy and people who have awesome circumstances who are unhappy...it really has nothing to do with the stuff going on outside of yourself. In fact, happiness is not something that you get to once you have everything that you want in life. Happiness is a way of being about your life, however that life looks on the outside, or even how it feels to you on the inside. Happiness is, too, a way of being that will empower you to *get* the stuff that you want in your life including the type of relationship that you want. Consider that you probably like to be around people who are happier. Yeah, well, what way are you most of the time? Have you noticed that people in your life move toward you when your energy is light and expansive and people move away from you when your energy is dark or contractive? It's natural and often unnoticed by both parties...

So, back to marketing - marketing is a clever conspiracy that convinces you of the lie that you're not enough, you don't have enough, you need whatever it is that's currently being marketed and sold to you. The noise of all this distracts you from what will really make you happy - yourself and your choice of how to be about whatever's going on in your life. As the infamous ad executive Don Draper says in *Mad Men*: "I create want." And that want that we find ourselves wrapped up in is antithetical to peace. That want is the camouflage for happiness.

Yet another issue that human beings have in relationship is the need to be right. There's a whole brain chemistry to this - people love the good feeling, physically and emotionally, that they get from thinking and believing that they're right. This is useful in some areas, but one area in which it's *not* useful is in being in a loving relationship with someone and having them feel appreciated, respected, smart, and celebrated. That's not going to happen when you're right, because you'll at the same time be making someone else wrong, and that's who the other person gets to be in relationship with. This is distinct: being right is a way of being or conducting yourself, which is different from being "correct" or "accurate." You can be accurate and correct without being righteous, smug, and letting people know that you are right and they are wrong - all of which describe "being right" in this context. Basically you get to be Right or Happy, and you get the right to choose... Choose wisely!

You can feel it internally - when you're being right internally and you make that extra point to someone else in a conversation (for example: "Well, I *told you* not to do that"). It can be an extremely addictive experience. This is another smokescreen that human beings deal with - the addiction to being right.

This is beginning to seem like a lot of problems, right? Don't worry, I'll have some solutions for you soon enough.

Another problem is: back in the day, you had a whole tribe to get all your needs met. You had a big family, you knew lots of people, you interacted with lots of people. Today, more than ever, people are very isolated. People who are wealthy are isolated, people who are technology savvy are isolated. Look around you the next time you're at a social gathering, you'll find at least some faces buried in phones, maybe more depending on what country you're reading this in. People are not practicing the skills of communicating the way they used to. One of the ways in which this makes relationships difficult is when we connect with another human being, we want that human being to supply everything that used to get supplied by a whole village. Suddenly, "I want you to be a father, a lover, a husband, creative, stable, dependable, wealthy, but I want you to have all the time in the world for all of this and to read to our children every night" and on and on...It's impossible to get all this from one person, and yet that's the demand we make on each other. So, this issue that gets in the way of really conscious, beautiful relationships is expecting from your partner just too much, like you can't get all that from one person. There needs to be some sort of thought given to distinguish what this particular relationship is about, what you want to get from it and give to it and why you're choosing it.

Another thing is, most people are oblivious to what kind of energy they're putting out. You may notice that some people are just cranky. Some people just complain about things and talk badly about other people, often and generally and reliably. You may notice that other people are upbeat, see the silver lining in everything, and naturally see the good in people first. Most people relate to this like they're just one way or the other, such as "I like to complain" or "I like to see the silver lining," but what I'm suggesting is first of all, people are generally oblivious to what kind of energy they're putting out. So you get the person who's kind of negative or constrained and it shows up in their speaking and people move gently away from that person in their lives. People respond to the energy that you are whether you're paying attention to it or not. Second, luckily, you can *practice* what kind of energy you want to put out.

So I'm suggesting that rather than being a slave to being "negative by nature," people are actually unconsciously practicing being negative or positive in how they view themselves and then in the actions they take. So people practice being negative and then wonder why someone doesn't want to go on a second date with them or always seem to be moving away from you either physically or emotionally.

Next, people like to claim that they're adults, but they generally relate to their feelings in the same way that children do... they relate to something someone else has done or said, like their feelings about that are *happening to them*. "I feel bad because they did something" or "I feel happy because of something they did." Spoiler alert: Everything after because is a lie. There's a general unwillingness to own and be responsible for one's feelings, and then a tendency to make up reasons to justify why one is feeling the way they do. In the moment, this can be especially sinister, leading to escalation of conflicts.

The final problems are subtle ones: there's tension, frustration, and confusion around romance. A lot of it looks like one party wants more than the other, and it becomes a source of constraint. We will go more deeply into this shortly...

Looking back on all of this, you can begin to understand why relationships are generally perceived as difficult, challenging, or hard to come by! Again - don't worry, the solutions are next...

The Solutions

Firstly, you can start to really look at being someone who people want to be in relationship with. *How could you be someone that people want to be in relationship with?* First, you could start to look at those people who you're in relationship with and ask, what are those characteristics that those people have? Maybe they're caring, upbeat, positive, friendly, playful, easy to be with, agreeable, or fun? And conversely, you could start to look at what kind of characteristics people have that you do *not* enjoy being in relationship with: cranky, negative, complainant, gossippy, *et cetera et cetera*.

One thing you could notice is that those positive characteristics are things that you can begin to **practice** and that the negative characteristics are something you could stop practicing. You could take on, for example, practicing not complaining and maybe on the positive side, being appreciative.

In short, I'm suggesting that all those ways that you think you are are a lot more malleable than you might initially imagine, to the point where **who you are is a practice** (or set of practices, habits, patterns, etc...) that you just haven't recognized as such until now. These ways you think you are...were all *practices* that you started at one point without realizing it, or these ways that you think you aren't are just practices that are just currently missing from your makeup, and you can change all of those at any time! Where it all starts is with practicing, moment by moment. Imagine you're playing golf. You take a swing at the ball. You miss it. You try again. You miss it again. You try a third time. You hit it! But it goes nowhere near the direction of where you wanted it to go. So you walk up to it and hit it again. Eventually, you'll be able to control the direction of the ball and be well on your way to being a scratch golfer. Sooner or later, *every* practice, no matter how challenging and uncomfortable and unfamiliar initially, becomes easier and eventually becomes automatic and who you are.

One thing you could first look at for yourself is what characteristics work in a relationship. Write five or ten of those down in a list and pick one to practice. Just practice. It's okay if you feel you don't do it often enough or correct enough at first. *Just practice*. It's okay if you fail and mess up. Just practice, and keep practicing.

You could do the same for the five or ten characteristics you say *don't* work in a relationship. Begin to work on refraining from doing these. Sometimes, they'll slip through - after all, these have been who you think you are, or are "the easiest things" for you to do, for as long as you can recall probably. But eventually, they won't slip through anymore and you'll look up and suddenly you'll realize you're a very different person than when you started. I (Kirk speaking) have seen this happen with Louis - he went from chaotic and reactive, often making me wrong and resisting my communications, to largely peaceable and even willing to take on and integrate my perspective and what I suggest to the point where we have a really valuable and productive partnership and friendship. The change, which I should add took some time, has been nothing short of dramatic. But it is permanent. And I would say (Louis speaking) that the greatest relationship of my life, which I'm in now, really only became possible because I took on practicing being excellent in my partnership and friendship with Kirk.

One thing that you could practice is *being a contribution*, like being valuable to whoever you're in relationship with. Being a contribution to me is something very specific. One way you can look at contribution is leaving people better off than you found them, meaning not just leaving them feeling better for just a moment (like with the compliment: "that's a really pretty tie")...it's really about looking to provide someone with something of real value, moment by moment, in your interactions with them. I'm not talking about doing things for people like giving them clothes or whatever...it's about altering the shape of what you're listening for from that self-centered survival listening to paying attention to and listening for what's really important to *them*, what are *they* trying to accomplish in life, what are *they* trying to get to, where are *they* stopped, where do *they* feel frustrated, and then also looking within yourself and your life for how you can provide something that's of real value and importance to them. So let's say you're talking to someone and they're having an issue in their career, and you knew something about that, then you might offer some perspective or advice...or offer them a new contact or maybe you could just hear that they're really wanting to be appreciated for who they are or the kind of work they do...or they're someone who likes to have fun and they don't have enough fun in their life so you could bring that! It doesn't have to be material - it could be a conversation or a kind look. It ultimately doesn't matter *what* it is - being a contribution in my world means being someone who listens for what's important to others and looks within themselves to see what and how they can provide something that might make a difference of value in service to others. This is, in my view, the most important thing to practice, above all.

The next tool that will help to solve all those problems above, I call the *conscious pause*. There's a certain quality to relationships that shows up from time to time and it's basically being an adversary to one another - where people get twisted and crossways because of a misunderstanding or impatience or someone being thoughtless or inconsiderate for a moment about something. One thing that's really important is being sensitive to an aspect of brain science. There's a lot that could be said about physiology, brain science, emotions, and thinking - but I'm just going to carve out a little piece of it: there are three aspects of the brain: the midbrain, which controls your basic autonomic functions like breathing and heartbeat, and your ability to regulate and process your emotions... the amygdala - where your ancient, reptilian, fight, flight, freeze or appease response comes from, and which can override everything else in the brain if a survival threat is sensed (even if no threat is actually there)...and finally, the neocortex, which is the seat of your ability to focus, control your behavior, and think rationally. So the amygdala's job is to keep you safe, basically. And it's constantly on the lookout, just like the survival listening, for threats...and so it often misperceives threats and gets you angry and hostile when nothing is actually wrong. Compare what it would be like to be facing down a tiger ready to take your head off (an actual threat) with your partner making you wrong for not doing the dishes (not actually a threat, but sometimes perceived by the brain as such, leaving you in a state of fight, flight, freeze or appease). What helps and what really works in situations like these is to *pause* in the midst of whenever you see your machinery start to take over and treat a situation like a threat when it's not, thus bringing your neocortex back online to have your next choices be rational and clear and proportionate to what you're experiencing, rather than disproportional and resulting in fights or struggle or escalation of a simple silly argument into a breakup or worse.

When you notice yourself getting hijacked by your amygdala, you can just stop and notice what's going on in your brain and body rather than allowing your behavior to be messed up by that. It may take a second, but once you come back online, you'll be glad you're there to make the best choice possible.

Another solution to some of the problems above is to not be so confused about what love is. We can redefine love in such a way that *it too is a practice* and not merely a passing, fleeting, and sometimes fickle feeling. Those feelings you might have experienced with your partner are nice, for sure. You may want your partner in the beginning of your relationship strongly, sexually, emotionally, and feel warm fuzzies when you think about or spend time with them. However, as those chemicals begin to fade over time (check out the work of Helen Fisher in her book *Why We Love* for more details on how infatuation, love, and desire are chemical reactions that change and often fade over time), in order for a relationship to sustain, we need to be clear on what love is and how to continue it. Indeed, most people don't have an abundance of the experience of love in their life. Most people want more love in their life, and by love they mean the tenderness, generosity, or connection they would like. I find that where people are looking for love is circumstantially and outside themselves (sound familiar?). In fact, most people believe that if they find the right person, they'll find the kind of love they're looking for.

What I'll suggest is that we can redefine love in such a way that it's something we can practice that can bring ALL of that, something we can all give to one another, that we can also give to ourselves (and thus not *require* others for): *love is the granting of space and being* to the other person, or *acceptance*. What is the granting of space? Well, have you noticed that humans can get themselves into crazy situations? Well, one way to be loving about that is to accept people fully where they're at. Then - have you noticed that people can be all kinds of different ways - fussy, negative, sad, despondent...or generous and loving, aggressive, angry, frustrated, et cetera? Well, one way for me to be loving would be to grant a person who had any of these ways of being full permission to be as they are in whatever situation they're in, without them having to deal with me about that. I don't have people explain to me how they got into the situation they're in, I'm just here now with them ready to move forward with them and help them through it at full steam. This choice of accepting the other person where they're at gives me the chance to be a contribution, generative, creative, of service, and generous with them.

The fact of the matter is, you can always be loving or any other way you choose, but *especially* with the conscious pause in your toolkit, no matter *how* the other person might hijack your amygdala (to fear, anger, whatever) through raising their voice or making you wrong, no matter *how* riled up they might get you, you can *always* make the conscious choice to grant them space and being. No matter what they're dealing with, no matter the situation, you can *always* take the time to notice their machinery the way you would your own and be generous with them. And you can always give this space and being, this acceptance, to yourself, too - regardless of whether you're in a relationship or not. The biggest beneficiary of this practice of love, in fact, is yourself. Being loving - to return for a moment to the conversation on the energy that you are - is a wonderful energy to put out into the world. This is one way to be responsible for the energy that you put out into the world.

Indeed, one way that people experience being loving is when someone is generous with them, taking the extra moment to say something beautiful to them or a gesture of kindness of some sort. Loving acts can make *you* feel wonderful in the *doing* of them, which is another reward of this view of love.

This also all turns love into a verb - you can choose to be accepting of a person or a situation totally independent of how you feel about them. This is what makes it a more powerful and useful view of love than the one science gives us: a chemical reaction that starts, continues, and stops relatively unpredictably or that the movies, TV, romance novels and pop culture says... Find the one and live happily ever after... because you can *choose* to be this way at any time and for as long as you want. This makes it possible for a relationship to last as long as you would like. If you want the experience of love in your life, *bring it* meaning practice accepting people and being a contribution to them. Which, note well, this doesn't mean accepting what they believe or how they think or what they're up to - all of which can differ from what you think or what you're up to or what you believe they should think.

One way I (Louis) have practiced much of this recently is when my partner literally told me that she didn't want to be with me anymore because of some reason she'd come up with (in fact, she'd been a bit mean earlier in the day and was feeling ashamed and wanting never to do that again to me). I heard what she was saying and told her, "I get where you're at and what you're feeling, but once you calm down, I know you'll think differently, so please go take care of yourself and come back to me to make relationship decisions only after doing that." Her amygdala was hijacked and so I granted her space in where she was at. In fact, I didn't accept her resignation, pun intended. In fact, I went out of my way to be a contribution and write a sweet email to her telling her how inspiring she's always been to me in never giving up in working on becoming more and better for herself in her life. Within an hour or so of her taking the time for self-care (which we will circle back to later) and clearing her head, she communicated to me her gratitude for the message and retracted her earlier statements. This all goes back to practicing what you want to be in relationship - when you practice it just to become more of what you'd want to have in a relationship *for them*, naturally the other person takes notice and begins to have a desire to embody their highest expression of what *they* want in a relationship in response. It's like the ancient Stoics used to say: "let each try to outdo the other in love." We will come back to this in a bit.

Again, please note well, all of the above assumes you're actually safe. It really wouldn't work to practice being accepting and generous to someone who was in fact regularly hurting you physically or emotionally.

Another aspect of this solution conversation is a return to how to look at happiness. Happiness is the thing, I suggested, that most gets threatened by marketing and the way we have our society set up. People often come to happiness with the assumption, mentioned above, that happiness will come to them when they achieve or acquire something that starts off outside themselves, like "I'll be happy when I get married" or "I'll be happy when I get divorced" or "I'll be happy when I buy the new house," or "I'll be happy when I sell the new house" or "I'll be happy when I can spend a month in Paris every year" *et cetera et cetera et cetera*.

But you'll notice that there's a whole world full of people working hard and scrambling to be happy mostly by purchasing things and trying to control other people (like "If I could just get her to be this way, I'd be happy"...or "If I could get him to do this or do that, I'd be happy") and none of that actually has anything to do with happiness, in fact quite the reverse. When you're in the world trying to accumulate stuff and control people, that's probably the worst thing you could do in the pursuit of happiness. So what I'm suggesting is that happiness comes from within, it's literally a choice one makes to *be happy in life*. And again, a wonderful way to be happy, to have the experience of being happy, is to be a contribution, be generous with others, especially the person that you love or care about, who you're in relationship with. So what if your happiness was literally up to you, and you could choose to be it, and you could practice it with the other person in your life? Wouldn't that be awesome? It is!!! Try it on...

So I'm not saying that everything I just shared is all there is about love or all there is about happiness, just that it's a very powerful place to start that will help with all the problems mentioned above.

So now, let's talk about romance. For the purpose of this conversation, let's say that romance is play and desire. Let's also say that play is giving and receiving without an agenda. And then desire is owning your want: when you want something, you own it. How could we create this experience of romance in a relationship? So speaking as the guy who's been married a couple of times, I (Kirk) was the guy that my wife was always upset with me because I wasn't romantic enough. I'd get suggestions and rolled eyes and that kind of thing - I was trying really hard and could never win. I kept trying and trying until I gave up. This is my unique experience, however I don't think this is a unique experience in the world of romance. Look and you'll probably be able to find yourself or someone you know in that experience as either the one with the demand/complaint or the one trying to satisfy that demand/complaint.

So given all that, and totally aligned with everything I just shared above about love and happiness, I have something. First thing we're going to do is create a game. A game is the pretense that one thing is more important or better than another. Take football as an example: we pretend that it's more important that one team gets more points than the other. Now, it doesn't really have to be that way - like the world isn't going to change if the Saints beat the Falcons this coming Sunday - but we pretend like it is really meaningful, and we get all excited about it, and give it everything we've got. Second thing, a game pulls for specific qualities. Football, for example, pulls for qualities like personal endurance, teamwork, personal performance, camaraderie et cetera.

So let's create what I call the *Romance Game*[™]:

And let's make it a game that pulls for the qualities of romance. So here's my suggestion - the game is that, there are three things that women want in a relationship and one thing that men want in a relationship. We'll get to the one thing that men want in a minute, and no, it's not what you might think. So, what are the three things that women want? The first thing that women want is they want to be cherished. Now, every woman gets to *say* what uniquely has *them* feel cherished, that's entirely subjective and up to her. However, in this game we assume that every woman wants the experience of being cherished.

Secondly, every woman wants the experience of being safe in all the ways that you can be safe: safe to express oneself, physically safe, financially safe, emotionally safe etc. And as before, every woman gets to say what has her feel safe - it's entirely up to her. Thirdly, every woman wants to have fun. So again, she gets to say what's fun, your job as the man, is to make sure your woman feels cherished, she feels safe and she's having fun. Conversely, the one thing that men want in relationship is, men want to be supported in their endeavors. So what I mean by supported is, the experience of someone's got your back, someone knows you're going to win, someone knows you have everything it takes. I don't mean helpful or making a lot of suggestions or advice or coaching, as men typically don't care for that much...just be supportive and interested and confident of their success and whatever is important to them. And by the way, this is now the new endeavor for the man do you see?

This game is *itself* one of your man's endeavors and it's now *your* job to make sure *he* wins. So, the game is played like this: periodically the man goes to the woman and says "hey, are you feeling cherished? And do you feel safe? And are you having fun?" And the coaching for the woman is, *tell the truth*, because you're training your man. And even if you have an emotional experience, be really generous and really gracious and really appreciative because even if all the answers are "no," and even if they're "hell no," what you want to appreciate is that your man is interested and asking; you're not fighting for it. You're not fighting to be heard and you're not having to beat him up or make him acquiesce to something. He's asking and he's interested so be super gracious, really honest and create something awesome, making it easy for him to win. Your job is to have him win. Often men are not that super sharp sometimes so you gotta clearly lay it out for him, don't infer anything, just say what it is you want and very often they're super attentive wanting to provide that. Conversely, when the woman is playing, she says hey, honey do you feel supported in your endeavors? All the same rules apply for the man - even if you have an emotional experience, if you're not feeling supported, be super gracious and super appreciative and just really glad that she's asking and that she's interested. Be truthful and be very gentle and have it work out for her that she asked. And then you talk it through and work it out like adults and be super gracious and work together to create something that's going to have both parties win. It's your job to have yourself and the other person win - this is a beautiful game. And so, my experience is that the experience that this game pulls for is the experience of love and happiness. When you're playing the game, you're literally being responsible for the relationship and you're being responsible for your participation in the relationship and you're being responsible for the success of the relationship.

Speaking of responsibility, something that's really critical in the romance game is learning to own your own feelings. Start to practice from the view that all the feelings you feel are 100% yours. It doesn't matter what other men feel or what other women feel - it doesn't matter what you think you should feel. You want to understand that your feelings are yours and they're not the other person's problem to fix. Any feeling you have is not their responsibility.

So, you're creating a game and *you* get to create the game. So, you could call all this *being at cause in the success of your relationship*. And if both people are playing, it's awesome. Now cherished, fun, and safe and supported, those don't have to be the things you're working to create the experience of for each other.

Some other possible components could be, partnership or being the butterfly, you know, you could play the game of being the one you would like to meet or being the one you would like the other person to be. You could create fun and play, you could create adding value to each other, you could create being generous. There's a lot of things you can create but the real key is, is that you're creating the game, you're checking in and having fun with it; you got to have fun with it, you got to play with it - fun is the magic sauce. Feel free to laugh and giggle. as you play and fail and succeed and play again.

And with all this, you can also create *a home to return to*. So, one of the values of the game is that, you know those times when the relationship's just *not it*? It was really great yesterday, or last week, and it's just very different today or this week? I've noticed that. So this can provide a home to return to for the couple. Your relationship becomes recoverable at any moment. There's always something you could do that could make a difference: a check-in, noticing that you're winning at some parts of the game but losing at another...and taking the new actions to work to start winning in the areas you're not. Like, once you have these conversations: are you feeling cherished, safe, fun, and supported? That action of having these conversations brings the couple back to what they're committed to. It's like a home base as it were, like an opportunity to be grounded in the relationship, grounded in the power and the partnership of the relationship. And again, you can create the game just the way you want it. By the way, the way I created it, it really works so feel free to *not* change it, but also feel free to change it. But it works the way it is, and you can create the game, you can practice it, you can play with it and you can bring some fun to it. And it's literally *your* game if you choose it and take it on, it's yours - it's the game of romance inside your relationship *the way you and your partner have created it*. And it is a really beautiful thing. And so what I really want to leave you with is whatever *you* want in your relationship, whatever you want, whatever *you* say is missing, can be brought through this game. You know that most couples have a complaint or two about the other person. "They're not connected, they're not present, they're not gentle, they're not loving, they're not erotic, they're not sexual, they're not romantic," just on and on...there's always something, right? Listen, whatever that complaint is, you bring that thing, you have that be your superpower, you bring that to the relationship, whatever it is and you know the other person will probably be delighted and catch right on board and then you really have something going. So, you can start with romance, you want romance, both parties love romance. By the way, men are very romantic. Women don't know that, I'm not sure why, but men are very romantic. Men love to do the thing that lights up their woman: the date, the dinner...just whatever is, men love being romantic. And so, you can start with romance, that's something that most couples generally agree is awesome and could be better. So, start with romance and get into the practice and habit of driving and guiding the quality and the experience of your relationship.

A higher level of play for this game is to *be the one your partner wants*. When you start practicing this game, and especially when you have in mind the ways we've talked about consciously practicing your energy or having the characteristics your partner prefers, you start to realize that who you are could fundamentally be constituted as a unique and specific contribution to and for them, for *their* needs and desires.

This is a deeper commitment and I'm not saying be unhealthy or codependent or kill off who you're committed to being for yourself, just that there's a really profound opportunity to reshape yourself over time into the exactly best right perfect relationship partner *for your partner*.

Of course, your level of capacity and willingness to commit to this level of playing the game may vary, nothing wrong about whatever level of engagement you choose with it, but you do need to realize that it's there. (Subtle hint about this "higher level of play": any time you begin to practice being someone different, the practice of who you are begins to move in this direction...it's really just a matter of intensity, you're always on the continuum of this level of play, it's just a question of how committed you are to it all.)

One other thing that you could put your attention on to enhance the quality of your relationship is to *create a why for your relationship*. Create *why* the relationship exists. It doesn't have to be grandiose. It could be: "To see how delightful and easy it could be to be in partnership with an amazing person." Or "to grow and heal together with the relationship itself as a vehicle for us discovering what parts of us could use some healing or elevation," like a chance for developing yourself and growing together. Or: "I would like the relationship I'm in to be a model of what's possible in relationships." It used to be couples got together and got married purely for financial/business/survival reasons and it didn't have to do much with personal preference or desires...so now, we have this thing where we couple by choice. So if we don't have to couple, it might be a good idea to choose why we *are* coupling - and especially to begin to create an idea of what I'm committing to giving in the relationship and what I'm receiving in the relationship.

Next, you can create for yourself whatever *level of commitment* you want for the relationship, so long as this gets communicated clearly ahead of time. You can create a relationship that is like "we're just here now together, enjoying each other, and we're committed to each other, but without needing an ultimate future." This sort of concern - what is this thing we're in? what does it mean? how long will it go on? - often makes people go crazy, so I'd like to help you preempt that. Like have you ever had a concern about your partner thinking they're more committed than you? Well, communication will help with that. There's nothing wrong with wanting a relationship that is only going to last for a certain period of time and then end, or is more casual than other relationships, or polyamorous, or whatever. It just needs to be clearly communicated and agreed to. This can be created with the ground rules of the game that your relationship can be.

What's Possible

Partnership is possible. Imagine holding hands with another human being, standing shoulder to shoulder looking in the same direction, looking at a question together, both committed that each of you get what you need and that you're both looking out for the relationship, as a separate entity. This is a practice I call *having the relationship's back*. This shows up in big things and in little things: how you're going to spend an evening together - one person lobbying to the other, and the other person being the same way, both wanting what they want - and both having what they want is possible from the romance game and the other things that we're talking about. The other thing that's possible from the realm that all the above practices create is the reset button, which we mentioned above. Since you're both playing the game, there's now this bookmark you've created together within that game (either the why of the relationship or the romance game itself can be the "game" in this context), like a save point in a video game. If you run into trouble later on, you can return to your commitment for each other or the relationship or the game and clean the slate to where you're back in the partnership space I just articulated for you.

This having the relationship's back can show up in little things, like asking yourself if something is good for the relationship or not. Let's say you're upset with me and maybe have forgotten to use the conscious pause to manage your hijacked amygdala to prevent there from being...unwarranted *venom and spite* in your communication when you leave a voicemail or email or text for me. What I'll do, because it's best for the relationship, if you let me know where you were at when you left that voicemail...is probably just delete it. I'll let it go because that's what's best for the relationship, even if my reaction to the voicemail itself could've been to be pretty upset, with a feeling of legitimacy in being upset. Other people might've listened to the voicemail and gotten re-hijacked, but I'm choosing instead to be loving here, to grant space and being to how you were and even to make it disappear from that set of things that impacts our relationship. So the question then becomes, what's best for you, I, *and* the relationship itself? Especially when you're practicing the conscious pause, you can begin to think holistically about whether or not your action, word, or communication is going to be good for your partner, you, or the relationship.

This might even work in a moment where you get upset at a request your partner makes, and so you manage yourself to let go of that upset or frustration in order to honor your partner in what they need. What's the highest choice and action for the relationship? In fact, you could even consider, in these moments of difficulty, a little something called your *body of work* - namely, if your life were a story and you were looking back on all you did and said, what would you want that to consist of? Something you could be proud of, or something you'd be ashamed of? The choice to practice either way is yours at any and every moment, for all the choices you make of how to be and act with your partner. I recommend creating a body of work that inspires you and that you are proud of!

The other side to having the relationship's back is *self-care* and what I call *keeping your side of the street clean*. Self-care is doing whatever it takes to make sure you're well, that you're safe and healthy and taken care of. It could be good sleep or healthy food, it could be regular exercise or a nice walk, it could even be a committed listener who is willing to have an objective conversation with you to allow you to vent or deal with some difficult circumstance that's come up in your life or your relationship. The whole idea is, just like you're at cause for the relationship through the romance game, you're also at cause here for yourself and being healthy and happy and well so that you can bring your A-game *to* the relationship. Indeed, this extends into keeping your side of the street clean: it may be sometimes that your partner at times is unwilling to reconcile with you or take responsibility or even answer the phone when you call. All there is for you to do is take responsibility for yourself, offer the olive branch, and let go of any attachment to them replying or showing up in a particular way. What I've found is, if you do those things, if you keep *your* side clean, then everything will be much easier, faster, and better if and or whenever they show back up or take responsibility or whatever. And especially when you let go of your attachment to them getting back into communication with you, often that is *the very moment* that the other person chooses to reach out. Spooky, huh?

This all goes back to the romance game and being at cause - there's always *something* you can do to own the relationship as yours and impact its trajectory. You can take on being 100% responsible for the relationship under any circumstance! Just imagine what it would be like if both parties were playing that game!

Keeping your side of the street clean includes owning your feelings, accepting that you are the cause and reason why you feel X way about Y thing, *not* because someone else did or said something to you. This puts the power to alter that state of being, *and* the ability to be at cause in whatever circumstance your emotion might be a reaction to. Whatever your emotional state, it's actually yours. And whether you can control it or not or whether you like it or not or whether something's just happened or not, it's still *yours* and you're responsible for how you act because of it. If you're having a dark day, it's still your responsibility if you blow up at your partner because of that. A familiar quip that fits perfectly here is: "Did you have a bad day, or did you have a bad five minutes and milk it all day?"

Being in a relationship to make yourself feel better is probably going to lead to a difficult time (like "I married you; now make me happy!"...it just doesn't work that way). Because if either party is in the relationship to make them feel a certain way, you're actually not being responsible for your feelings and are looking to someone else to cause your feelings to be a certain way. In that case, you don't actually have your hands on the steering wheel of your feelings. It's actually kind of lazy to blame your feelings on someone else because then you don't have to be responsible for them, you don't have to do the mental work of being with the emotional impact of how terrible you were to that person or what not...blame and assigning responsibility outside of you avoids all that. This all isn't meant harshly, it's just that you're ultimately responsible for your feelings and if you can accept that responsibility, you actually can have your feelings work for you and for everybody else, not have them be a problem, and have them be a wonderful part of your life.

With all of these above, there's a dance between keeping your attention on yourself so your highest and best expression can be available for the relationship...and, on the other hand, keeping your attention directly on the other person to see how you can make a difference for them...or the relationship as a whole, to see how it's impacting you both.

Next, if you want something more in the relationship - more play, fun, adventure, travel, even boats or cars...*bring it*. *You* be the one to start the conversations for it, or even make it happen in your own life first. It isn't initially either party's responsibility to upgrade the relationship in whatever ways you want, but once you're communicating from within *partnership*, it may only take a single conversation for you to together generate whatever it is you want and need. This avoids the pitfall of making the other person feel guilty or shameful for not delivering what you want, and instead gives them the opportunity to do whatever it is they can to bring that without feeling pressured or solely responsible for making up for something the relationship initially lacks. (Of course, from the view of the romance game, you aren't missing anything except what you say is missing).

You may think that some of these things are difficult, some are easy, these different ways of being or characteristics and conversations we've been talking about. You may still have the opinion that you are a particular way or life's a particular way or "this is the way men/women/relationships are" and I'm just going to say, all of that is B.S. and that there is no truth to any of that and that everything is up for invention. You know this game thing I've been talking about the whole time? *Everything is a game, everything is an invention*. You can be any way you want to be in life and all you have to do is start practicing. Just get honest about where you're at and start practicing where you want to be in the world. Anything you want to pursue in life is available and all there is to do is to get started. The only thing to get clear on and begin to work with is your conversation that it's not possible. Why all this is relevant is it's really important to be responsible for the constraints or the negative self-talk that you're putting on yourself. I invite you to consider that anytime something seems impossible or difficult or you have some negative thought about the future, just consider that *there is no spoon*. This is a phrase from the movie *The Matrix*, in a scene where the main character Neo enters a waiting room full of gifted children. One of the children is bending a spoon with the power of his mind. Neo tries and finds that it's very difficult. The child replies that it's not the spoon that's bending, it's himself. So, to apply this, whenever you're contemplating the future around relationships and have views like "I'm never going to have a relationship" or "I'm never going to have the relationship I want" or "They're always going to be this way" or "they're never going to be responsible" or "this is always going to be difficult," consider that all of these are made up in your mind and literally do not exist. *There is no spoon*. Stop trying to fix what you made up that's broken, realize you made it all up, and get out there and start practicing.

Consider what you could create in a relationship given all that is available to you now!

Conscious Sex

This whole thing - all the above about having a great relationship - is 24/7 foreplay. In cultivating all those characteristics and ways of being and practices above, you're creating a condition of safety, connection, communication, and partnership that allows for and that creates the backdrop for a really excellent and satisfying sex life. You are becoming the person that your partner would like to have sex with. The person you become, and how you're being, is going to have the greatest impact on whether your partner - or any person you're connecting with, really - will want to have sex with you. If you're winning the romance game, then there is a background of your partner feeling cherished, supported, safe, and having fun.

From there, it's a simple twist to adapt the romance game to make it *the sex game*: namely, you can ask your partner "What are the qualities you want from me during sex? Or what do you want me to do for you during sex?" (If you don't have a partner... Ask yourself these same questions and work from there...) Now imagine both partners are playing this game. To repeat what the ancient Stoic philosophers said, "Let each try to outdo the other in love," and I will add: "Let each try to outdo the other in *making love*." The key, by the way, to this game (or any game) working is to not be attached to getting what you want out of the other person, and practice being who they want and giving them what they want with an intention for you to enjoy the playing of the game itself and enjoy that you're producing a result *for them*. One of my (Louis) most cherished experiences that this reminds me of is from when I first became sexual in college, with one of my first girlfriends. I pleased her in just the way she most loved, but without intercourse, I hadn't gotten anything I wanted, and then she just passed out. This sounds like it might be disappointing, but where I was coming from was satisfaction with the fact that I'd pleased her so much that I enjoyed the contribution I had been for her, and that was pleasure enough for me at that time. Play this game long enough and your partner will naturally turn around and want to give you what you most want as well, but not if you're playing it like a mechanical tit-for-tat thing. That wouldn't feel as good as freely giving, in an unattached way, to someone who then has the opportunity to reciprocate as feels good to them at their own pace.

This game and you winning at it applies to you *from your side* too - in order to make sure you're taken care of and getting what you want, you need to let your partner know and you could even create a game around it. You need to speak up. You need to not just assume that they're going to act a certain way that you want without you telling them. And the sex game is a perfect structure for the conversations that would need to happen from your side to get you all you need and want from sex too.

So the existence of the romance and sex games imply, by the way, that you could theoretically create a game for any partnership or relationship or friendship you're in, or for any aspect of that relationship or partnership. When I (Louis) go out of my way to manage resistance in going the extra mile in coauthoring this book, for example, I notice that Kirk happens to have gone out of his way to do marketing for our event with rigorous consistency. And that's because we've created a game around our friendship to surprise, delight, uplift, and empower each other by going that extra mile wherever possible. Now it's up to you to use *your* own ingenuity to figure out infinitely many games to create and thus raise the quality of all your relationships!

Back to the world of the romance game and how that impacts sex, though - the qualities people desire in a loving relationship are really being able to count on their partner, they're reliable, they're supportive, you feel safe with them, you feel like they can rely on that partner to be a certain way...all these sorts of things. Well, sexual desire is something quite different. People often find their partner is most attractive when they're distant and across the room, away from them for a certain amount of time, or seeing their partner in his or her element like before they're on stage or doing their work or you're noticing that your partner is being admired by other people. These are things that tend to bring up desire, that spark sexual desire. There's this tension between love and caring and predictable and safe on the one hand, and adventurous and distant and can't-have-but-really-want and other-people-want-them and there's a sort of mystery and adventure to that side of it. There's a *continuum* from love to desire. And the trick is to create something with your partner around this to cultivate what they need to keep feeling that desire for you that is alive and real.

So now there's a *sexual desire game* for you to play, too: what are the ways you could be a cause in the experience (for your partner) of them desiring you more, and vice-versa? Ways you could cultivate those qualities and behaviors that inspire desire? Start practicing what they need and start sharing and asking from them what they want.

Next, people are always going to have different preferences and proclivities, different things sexually that they desire, often without having any recollection of how those got there. Not everyone's going to get everything they want from their partner in this realm, however if you *ask* and share what you want in a space of love and respect and honor and without attachment with your partner, you have the chance to create almost literally *whatever* sexual experience you want with them.

Let's go back to the list of characteristics you created in The Solutions section. Basically, what we'll do now is apply that to sex: what characteristics do you want in a sexual partner? And it's OK if that list is, as we suggested above with that continuum between desire and care, even *very* different from what you want in a romantic partner. You might have heard the phrase "lady in the streets, freak in the sheets," and despite the really distasteful hint of our culture's confused double-standard around how "women should be" which I'll just point out to say I don't agree with, this phrase *does* adequately capture the two sides of the spectrum of love and desire and how you can have two very divergent things you're putting your attention on.

A lot of people, I would suggest, cheat on their partner because in their own mind they've just assumed over time that their partner, who maybe at first seemed very desirable, is now *only* a great long-term romantic partner or husband...who've experienced too much of one side of the spectrum to the point where they're now resigned and cynical about having that other part of the spectrum back and need to go someplace else for it.

This ties into *how you hold your partner in your mind*. How you hold your partner is very important to your satisfaction in your relationship and in sex, and what I mean by that is how you choose to frame them. If you've come to assume that they're non-sexual or unattractive or whatever, how you're choosing to hold them is no longer helpful in the intention of having great sex with them.

So whatever's there for you in your mind or conversation that makes you dissatisfied, I would take a look at it and have a conversation about why it's there. A conversation with someone close to you who isn't them, first to figure out if whatever you think is actually something real, and then a conversation with your partner themselves. This conversation might shift how you hold and see your partner and give you access to the chance for them to surprise and delight you in ways that, left to your own mind's devices, you would never have seen, experienced, or imagined you could have! Your partner might secretly miss the sex you used to have but not even realize that all they need to start doing is that little move at the end to show you that they care and want to include you. A *lot* becomes possible once you open up and share what's really going on in your mind.

So go hold your partner lovingly, and go *hold* your partner lovingly.

Epilogue

There's a lot I just gave you, I know. But the journey of a thousand miles always starts with a single step.

There's a story told that I've always resonated with, and if you were to take nothing else from this book, this is the place to start:

“An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. ‘A fight is going on inside me,’ he said to the boy. ‘It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.’ He continued, ‘The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.’ The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, ‘Which wolf will win?’ The old Cherokee simply replied, ‘The one you feed.’”

Anything you want is available through ongoing practice. Your good habits and bad habits, empowering thoughts and disempowering thoughts, helpful views and unhelpful views...they are these two wolves. Which will *you* feed through practicing what you want?

Let's keep it easy and simple: pick one thing from this book to practice. Just one. And give everything that you are to that practice. One way of being (like being loving), one set of actions (like consistently attending to and giving what they want to your partner)...and sooner or later, you'll find that you have the outcomes loving and contributing people have, like great sex and great relationships.

For resources and or questions about all this, feel free to reach out to either of us:

Kirk McDow at kirkmcdow.com

or

Louis Brantmeyer at louisbrantmeyer.com. Kirk focuses more about managing and being in relationships, Louis more about creating them from nothing.