

You really CAN transform your relationship into a

# Joyful and STEAMY Love Affair

A Weekend at Richard and Diana Daffner's Intimacy Retreat

By Angela Eward-Mangione

Most good marriages chug along at a contented pace, taking the daily squabbles over kids, work, and money in stride. When you hit a major bump—a serious illness, infidelity, financial meltdown—you know it's probably time to see a couples counselor. But what about the rest of the time, when the daily grind leaves you feeling vaguely out of synch and wondering what happened to that spark of excitement that used to enliven your relationship? If you believe that your marriage—and your sex life—could use a shot of adrenalin, you may want to try a retreat aimed at adding depth and intimacy to your long-term relationship.

My husband and I are certainly happy enough with our relationship, but we also are aware of how easy it is to let little things stand in the way of a deeper level of intimacy. And a little vacation never hurt anyone, either. So after researching some of the available options, we decided to try a weekend workshop called Lessons In Intimacy, billed as a surefire way to “reignite your relationship and rekindle the passion” and to “celebrate your sexual intimacy as a blissful union.” The workshop was led by Richard and Diana Daffner, nationally known Tantra teachers and relationship coaches who help couples deepen their intimacy on physical, emotional and spiritual levels on a regular basis. According to their website, they are also both certified sexologists, but if you're thinking Kinsey Report, think again. The Daffners take a decidedly New Age, Eastern-tinged approach to sexual intimacy, based on their

development of something they call Tantra Tai Chi. Tantra is an ancient spiritual path that originated in India, and that recognizes sexual energy as a means to awakening your higher consciousness. The premise behind Tantra Tai Chi is the movement of energy between the sex and heart centers of the body. It is designed to augment and harmonize loving sexual energy through exercises with your partner. In their letter responding to our inquiry about the retreat, Richard and Diana wrote, “We are dedicated to the evolution of relationship to its highest spiritual potential and we look forward to sharing with you many new—and ancient—ways of



enhancing your love through the awakened joy of 'sacred sexuality.'”

Even though we didn't know exactly what to expect, we sensed that the dedication and passion they have for their work would provide a unique experience. We liked the idea

of turning our already strong and vibrant relationship into even more of a love affair. As a couple, we are always committed to growth, and what could be a better way to grow than through deepening the intimate bonds of our physical relationship?

My husband and I chose to attend one of

Richard and Diana's retreats in Siesta Key, Florida, a one hour drive from where we live. So we grabbed our swimsuits, sandals, and tanning lotion and left early to beat the traffic. We wanted to have some time to relax in the Siesta Key area before the retreat began at 7:30 Friday night. Most of my friends agreed that it sounded like fun, although my mother-in-law asked, “Why would you go on a retreat like that if you're not having trouble with your marriage?” It's the kind of question that defines the difference between our two generations, but it did plant a seed of caution in my mind. I wondered briefly if we might be taking a risk of upsetting the apple cart, or if we'd be embarrassed acting sexually in front of 18 strangers.

My doubts evaporated on the first night of the retreat, when we gathered in a spacious, comfortable, beautifully decorated room in the Daffners' home. Richard and Diana formed a circle with a combination of cushions, zafus, and a few folding chairs for all 10 couples to sit together. After introductions, Diana initiated a ritual in which she lightly sprinkled each couple with rosemary leaves. Next, a Tibetan bowl ceremony roused our ears, and we began to feel our mundane, workaday selves and routines gently fade away into the sacred space we all co-created. During a Talking Stick Ceremony borrowed from Native American tradition, we passed the stick as each of us declared our intentions for the weekend. We said our names and the affirmation, “I am present.” Some couples said they wanted to meet spiritually in lovemaking, rather than just physically; some wanted to gain a comfort level in exploring sexuality and intimacy; others simply wanted to deepen their relationships. A few admitted that they felt weary from raising children and caring for their elders, and wanted to recharge the relationship with vibrancy and fun. That spirit of sharing and listening set the stage for the entire weekend. We would indeed talk about how to be and feel more vibrant, how to honor ourselves as sexual and spiritual beings, and how to share that honor with our partners in a sacred, awesome way. I was also somewhat relieved to hear that the more intimate “Home Play Practice” exer-

cises would take place privately between partners in their hotel rooms.

Diana explained that we should think of sex as “shared energy exchange,” and begin paying attention to the energy moving through our bodies. We needed, she said, to develop the ability to direct this energy, and to infuse our intimate connections with vibrancy and presence. Richard spoke about the Tantra Tai Chi movements that would allow us to unlearn our misconceptions about sex. Tantra Tai Chi, he said, is a “relationship exercise” that combines internal focus and sexual energy with the movements of tai chi, the ancient Chinese system of exercise. The premise behind Tantra Tai Chi is similar to the Buddhist concept of mindfulness: by bringing our awareness to the body, we can enter the present moment. But the difference between the Daffners’ approach and traditional tai chi is that these movements help us focus on our sexual energy. During one exercise, we simply tightened our genital muscles to bring attention to this part of the body and recognize this sex center as abundant with powerful energy. In Eastern practice this center—which corresponds to the perineum, a spot midway between the anus and the genitals—is called the first chakra; in Taoist Tai Chi, it is the Hui Yin point. It is considered the gateway to energies we can experience through our body.

Our first “Home Play Practice” focused on maintaining eye contact, as well as the physical and verbal identification and alignment of the sex and heart centers. The heart center is located in the center of your chest, and is the location from which emotions and spirituality flow. My husband and I shared a continuing gaze while our touch and awareness ignited and joined these two energy cen-

ters, allowing our love and sexuality to flow at the same time. The experience is much like meditation—in this case, meditation during physical intimacy.

On Saturday morning, we all met back at the workshop space and discussed how our practice went the night before. Many people spoke of a much appreciated “reconnection” with their partner, and most joyously referred to the lovemaking that ensued after their practice. It was easy to see that the energy of our group had changed. Participants had clearly enjoyed the homework, and were reveling in the increased intimacy and connection they were already feeling with their partner.

Saturday afternoon focused primarily on the women, and honoring the Goddess in each of us. We enjoyed wrapping ourselves in colorful sarongs and lounging on comfortable wicker chairs on the back lanai, while the men bathed our feet in warm water with essence of rose oil. After lunch, we received an in-depth lesson on anatomy that we could apply to our Home



Play Practice that evening, and to our ongoing practice in daily life. This time the practice involved sex and heart alignment with self-loving. Arousal, self-indulgence and eye contact were all involved in this exercise, and each of us spent about 15 minutes doing our part of the exercise. In fact, one of the most appealing aspects of the Home Play Practices, and all the techniques that Richard and Diana taught, is that they can be extended as long as couples want, yet are simple enough to fit into the typical busy schedules of most couples. Many times during the retreat, Richard and Diana spoke of their commitment to practice every day,

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even if only for 10 minutes.

Saturday night, we were all treated to a “sensory journey.” Richard and Diana set up massage tables all over the room, and each partner enjoyed 30 minutes on the table, blindfolded, and open to whatever experience their partner chose for them. We were invited to choose from an array of playthings, including feathers, fruit, whipped cream, chocolate, bells (for auditory experience), hot rocks and more. During this time, we also honored each of our partner’s chakras by placing our hands on each center and verbally affirming our respect for it. This was a tremendously rich experience, and one that my husband and I decided to make a regular practice.

Sunday morning was somewhat bittersweet, mixing our enthusiasm over how much we had learned and shared with the realization that this was our last day at the retreat. Richard led a discussion on male anatomy, emphasizing the importance of shifting focus from reaching the “goal” of an orgasm to making sex a “shared energy exchange.” After more time for practicing our Tantra tai chi moves together out on the lanai, each couple retreated to a separate area of the grounds where partners could engage privately in their own talking stick ceremony. We were told to speak openly to our Divine Being/Source about anything we wanted while our partner listened. I felt honored and privileged to be a witness as my husband spoke to his Divine Source,

reminding both of us how lucky we are to share this life together.

After hugs all around, and information about future retreats, some couples headed home while others stayed for a vibrant drum circle on Siesta Key Beach. In the end, the Daffners made Tantra Tai Chi accessible for all of us, and made certain to be available for any participants who needed help with any part of the practices. The weekend exceeded my expectations, and became one of our most treasured experiences as a couple. Although the Daffners don’t specifically address other issues in the couples’ relationships, it seemed clear to us that their Intimacy Retreat is geared to couples who are on a pretty firm foundation and looking either to deepen an already sound relationship or to perk up one that is in danger of drifting into the blahs.

If you are interested in turning your relationship into a daily love affair, you should consider an intimacy retreat. This type of experience might well be just the thing to take you and your spouse to that next level in your relationship and journey together.

You can learn more about the Daffners’ work at their website, [www.IntimacyRetreats.com](http://www.IntimacyRetreats.com)