

RETURN TO EDEN

— The Adam and Eve Guide to Improving Your Relationship —

Greetings and thank you for downloading “Return to Eden,” a first-of-its-kind guide to helping you deepen, strengthen, and enrich your relationship by drawing on the many commonalities between the story of Adam and Eve, as told in the Bible and throughout history, and the developmental approach to couples therapy. We are three people with varying backgrounds and a shared interest in promoting conversation, dialogue, and improvement within couples.

Bruce is a family columnist at the *New York Times*, a TV host, and the author of six consecutive *New York Times* bestsellers, including *The Secrets of Happy Families* and *The Council of Dads*. Ellyn and Peter, a couple themselves, are internationally recognized experts on couples therapy and are co-founders and directors of The Couples Institute in Menlo Park, California. They are also the authors of *In Quest of the Mythical Mate* and *Tell Me No Lies*.

We came together with the goal of inspiring conversations that marry the sometimes opposing worlds of timeless wisdom and timely knowledge. Whether you’re a newlywed, a happily married couple or partners with unresolved disagreements, we feel confident this guide will trigger new and productive avenues of discovery. The four discussion sessions included here are designed to be used in groups that might enjoy and benefit from sharing fresh, powerful insights with others in a safe, supportive environment or be used privately with your partner to explore these topics in a more intimate setting. Sessions can be expert- or lay-led.

Otherwise, we offer no guidelines, only this request: We hope you enjoy these materials, find meaning in the questions and exercises attached, and use the insights of Bruce’s book *The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us* along with the wisdom of Ellyn and Peter’s decades of experience to bring new insights into your lives. And please let us know how it works!

BRUCE FEILER

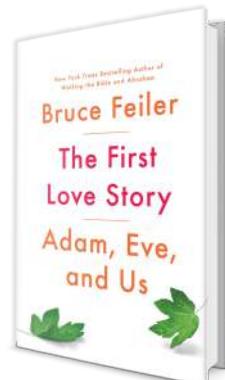
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RETURN TO EDEN

— Session I: CONNECTION —

OPENING

In the beginning, there was a Garden. Everything was wonderful. Easy, effortless, and enjoyable. “They were naked and knew no shame,” the Bible says. And they thought it would last forever.

Just like the start of your relationship. Connecting at the beginning was easy. You brought out the best in each other. You were fascinated with each other, and everything you did was interesting. There was passion, giving, and receiving. You weren’t asking each other to change. You each were at your best. You liked who you were, and your partner accepted you. The purpose of this time was to attach and set the stage for commitment.

But over time as the demands of life and responsibilities intrude, you begin to push to the background your awareness of the qualities that were once so attractive. You begin to leave that wonderful feeling of being in your own garden together.

It’s often good to go back in time. Remember the endearing qualities that first attracted you to your partner. They should not be forgotten. This first session is about remembering your earliest connections and reclaiming your Eden.

EXERCISE

Topic 1: What was exciting, and what traits initially attracted you to your partner?

The First Love Story: Pages 54–57, How Men and Women Are Attracted to Different Things

The Developmental Model: In the falling-in-love stage when we first meet, similarities are magnified and differences are overlooked. There is a lot of nurturing, and special efforts are made to accommodate and please each other.

Topic 2: What do you do that brings out the best in your partner?

The First Love Story: Pages 49–54, The Crisis of Loneliness

The Developmental Model: Discuss how each of you can bring out the best in each other today. You brought out the best in the beginning. We think you can do it again. How do you give compliments, and how do you encourage the best in your loved one?

Topic 3: Let’s assume your partner may not be perfect and has some qualities or habits that are frustrating to you.

The Developmental Model: You probably realize it would be hard to live with an exact clone of yourself. We are attracted by similarities. But we grow through differences. In fact those differences push us to grow.

Here are two questions to discuss: *Would you like to live with a personality clone of yourself? Why, or why not?*
Which of the differences have you learned to live with?

TAKEAWAY EXERCISE *(To be done together or privately with your partner)*

God didn’t create Eve as a clone of Adam. That means you have to deal with differences.

Design your own mate:

Part I

Pick from any of the traits described below and even add a lot more. Go wild. Create a list of all the positive traits you wish for in your mate. Your dream partner can now be assembled like ordering a new car. It might be easiest to print this list so you can circle your favorites and add others.

- Intelligent
- Sensitive
- Interesting
- Fun-loving
- Wants as many kids as I do
- Great parent
- Has many exciting interests
- Attractive
- Values good health
- Enjoys their work
- Likes animals
- Honest
- Loves me for who I am
- Great sense of humor
- Enjoys sex about as often as I do
- Loves taking care of others
- Gives me all the space I want
- Sparkling conversationalist
- Loves cooking for me
- Enjoys the same foods, movies, music
- Manages money well
- Extroverted/fun in social situations
- Introverted/likes quiet, romantic
- Likes to exercise
- Great travel companion
- Has the same sense of adventure
- Loves what they do professionally
- Knows just how much to tease me
- Trustworthy
- Wants to talk when I do
- Is willing to go to therapy (just in case)

Wow, what an ideal partner. And he or she is all yours. Just keep reading.

Part II

Now that you have described your dream partner, let's do Part II. Because we are all flawed creatures, we have to balance the picture. For every four positive traits identified above, you now need to include one irritant.

Look at the list below and choose one characteristic for every four on your original list. What are you willing to live with in order to have all those juicy positives? In this scenario, the negatives are fixed and pretty permanent.

Remember the ratio is 4:1. Count your list of positive traits and divide by 4 to see how many traits you need to select from the list below.

- Insecure
- Moody
- Narcissistic
- Passive-aggressive
- Conflict-avoidant
- Hairy back
- Lazy
- Not interested in sex when I am
- Addicted to TV or video games
- Doesn't want same number of kids
- Poor kisser
- Loves eating junk foods
- Messy
- Forgets birthdays and anniversaries
- Stingy
- Jealous
- Insecure
- Really embarrassing fashion style
- Nags
- Chews with mouth open
- Snores loud enough to scare animals
- No sense of humor
- Watches way too much TV
- Rarely expresses emotions
- Trapped in go-nowhere job and doesn't mind it
- Spends way over the budget
- Interrupts and doesn't listen well
- Swears a lot
- Tendency to be depressive
- Too much overweight or underweight
- No common activities
- Has unpleasant friends
- Bad health

There you have it—a real live human being who is complex, annoying, loving, and full of contradictions.

Part III

Make a three-day commitment. For those days, experiment with accepting your partner's irritating traits. Increase your positive recognition of your partner's pluses and overlook their negatives.

Also, do your best to evaluate yourself against these lists and look at the ratio you bring to your relationship.

RETURN TO EDEN

— Session II: CONFLICT —

OPENING

When we emerge from the initial, wondrous falling-in-love stage of our relationships, we are faced with a new set of challenges. Not unlike Adam and Eve exiting the Garden.

Conflicts are inevitable. Disillusionments are common. Differences you didn't notice before begin to emerge. As the differences arise, each lover takes the other "down from the idealized pedestal." The differences that were initially attractive to you often become problematic.

In the story of Adam and Eve, the disillusionments prove pivotal. Eve is frustrated in the relationship and wants independence, so she goes off, meets the snake, and eats the fruit, but then she returns to Adam. He is frustrated by her actions but chooses to join her in eating. Once caught, he blames her for eating first. (She in turn blames the snake.) Once out of Eden, they must decide whether or not to forgive each other and remain together; once their children disappoint, they must decide whether or not to continue as a couple.

Encountering major disillusionments are normal. It's how you learn to manage conflict and difference that sets the trajectory for your relationship. In this session, we are going to talk about everyday conflicts that affect your relationship.

EXERCISE

Do a shared brainstorm on these questions:

1. What do couples do in times of conflict or disagreement when they are coming from their better or higher self? Think of movies, books, stories, maybe some family or friend examples. These might include taking a time-out, making eye contact, using the right tone of voice. Please assemble a long list.
2. What do couples do in times of conflict that doesn't work or is ineffective? Again think of examples from movies, books, songs, or relatives. These might include blaming, withdrawing, or pouting.

Topic 1: How did Adam and Eve handle disagreements in their relationship?

The First Love Story: You might discuss Eve going off into the garden alone, Eve eating the fruit, Adam deciding whether or not to join her, Adam and Eve reacting to God accusing them of disobedience, and/or Adam blaming Eve for eating the fruit first.

Topic 2: How many of you grew up in families in which family members used the positive traits instead of the negative ones half or more than half the time?

The Developmental Model: Under stress, people will do the ineffective things. That is normal. Now here is an interesting question: How many of you in your family of origin shifted from the traits on the ineffective list to those on the effective list more than 50 percent of the time during a heated discussion?

Pete has surveyed over 4,000 people who have been through his weekend workshops for couples. Only 10 to 15 percent report growing up in this kind of family. The startling conclusion: Under stress, the ineffective list is what is statistically normal. Not healthy, just normal. So, in case you ever wondered if you were normal, congratulations—you made it!

The effective list is statistically abnormal, unusual, exceptional. And just as in any area of human endeavor, if we wish to become exceptional, it will require knowledge, skills, and sustained motivation.

Topic 3: During conflict, what do you do that you're proud of and what do you do that you're not proud of?

The First Love Story: Pages 183–188, The Fine Art of Pointing Fingers

The Developmental Model: Ineffective behaviors often occur when partners are not willing to be vulnerable and transparent about what they're feeling. Partners blow up.

Just about every ineffective reaction is a self-protective response to minimize or avoid emotional pain, fear, or some kind of threat. Unfortunately our self-protective reactions then trigger our partner's self-protective reflexes. This is why and how arguments keep escalating.

TAKEAWAY EXERCISE *(To be done together or privately with your partner)*

Your conflict style reminds you of what animal: turtle, porcupine, ostrich, or lion? Do you put your head in the sand and hide from conflict? Do you get prickly and push others away? Do you roar?

Say out loud for example, "I am a porcupine. I get prickly so I keep others away from me when I am upset."

Now pick an animal that represents how you would like to be when facing disagreement. Then say out loud the name of the animal and the trait you would like to embody.

For example, "I would like to be like a gazelle, known for my gentle curiosity." Or "I am a horse. I run away skittishly at first. But, I will come back gently."

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— Session III: RECONNECTION —

OPENING

Adam and Eve experience a defining moment when they are kicked out of the Garden of Eden. This moment could destroy their relationship. Instead they come together and have children. When couples learn how to own up, apologize, repair the rupture, and mend the hurt, they build a long-standing connection. The process of doing that often strengthens them as a couple because it forces them to decide whether to compete or work together as a team.

In this session, we are going to talk about how we overcome and work through conflict to reestablish the bond with our partner.

EXERCISE

We all do things that hurt or offend our partners. Things that often call for an apology. But what are the elements of a good apology? Examples might include owning up to what you did, identifying the effect of what you did on your partner. What are the elements of a bad apology? Examples might include mumbling “I’m sorry” or saying “I’m sorry if your feelings were hurt.”

Topic 1: How did Adam and Eve handle their biggest conflict, getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden?

The First Love Story: Pages 212–217, Why Is Hurt a Part of Every Relationship?

Topic 2: What makes it difficult for a part of you to apologize?

Topic 3: Share something positive that you or your partner have done to repair or mend hurt feelings.

The First Love Story: Pages 201–205

TAKEAWAY

Discuss and implement the five steps of an effective apology.

HOW TO APOLOGIZE by Peter Pearson

Being apologetic doesn’t come easily for me. Unfortunately, being inconsiderate and self-centered does. So I realized long ago that my marital survival would depend on two things: 1) learning to apologize and 2) becoming less selfish and more considerate.

It was easier to start with apologies. Over time, I got better and better at learning how to apologize. I was amazed at the effect.

First, it was the basic mumbling of “I’m sorry.” Those two words were remarkable in healing bruised feelings. It was as if I had a license to do what I wanted—as long as I looked sincere and said, “I’m sorry.” It was like having a “Get Out of Jail Free” Monopoly card.

Alas, you probably recognize the obvious limitations of that approach.

I thought that perhaps I just needed a better apology. So I worked on sprucing it up. I would put my apology in a tuxedo, and my wife, Ellyn, would be so grateful that I would get another reprieve.

Given my personality, I had lots of opportunity to practice making apologies. There was a lot of trial and error along the way, and quite a bit of refining. Ultimately I created a formula. It’s for the bigger offenses or for offenses that you have committed so repeatedly that it has created a lot of tension for your mate.

The Five-Step Formula for a Really Good Apology

1. Describe the offense. This is necessary so Ellyn knows exactly what I am apologizing for.
2. Describe what I think is the effect on Ellyn. This display of empathy is quite comforting to her.
3. Describe why I did what I did. This has the effect of reassuring her that I am on top of the problem and thus reduces her need to grill me, asking, “Why in the world do you keep doing x?”
4. Describe why I am interested in changing the offensive behavior. Again this is necessary to demonstrate an understanding of the big picture that we are a couple and a team.
5. Describe a self-imposed penalty for not changing. This one is the clincher. I think of an appropriate penalty for my offensive behavior, and I tell it to Ellyn. I tell her that if I don’t change I will impose the penalty on myself. This reassures Ellyn that I mean business. She relaxes her vigilance and stops looking over my shoulder, and I feel more at ease.

I encourage you to write your apology. Writing it out first or writing it and then giving it to your mate has several advantages:

1. You can collect and refine your thoughts. It is very difficult to think through an apology on the fly, especially if your angry partner is on the offense.
2. You will be heard all the way through. Nobody will interrupt and start yelling at a mate when they are reading an apology.
3. You avoid hostile questions along the way if you start by speaking the apology. These negative questions have the nasty effect of derailing your good intentions, and then you just have another argument, which demands another apology.
4. You avoid the raised eyebrows and squinting eyes during the apology that just derail you again. (See the last sentence in Number 3.)
5. It looks like you have given this some serious thought (which might even be true), and you get many points for this.
6. You don’t have to sleep on the couch tonight.

Putting It All Together

1. “Ellyn, I’ve been thinking about your comments that I don’t follow through consistently with what I say I’m going to do. Well, I apologize for that.”
2. “Being inconsistent means you can never be sure whether I will follow through or not. I imagine it keeps you on edge and wondering if you should “remind” me or not. This puts you in a dilemma. If you don’t speak up, you run the risk that I won’t follow through, and then it is too late to take corrective action. If you do speak up, you run the risk of coming across like a nag. Either way, a part of you will feel like you can’t win.”
3. “I hate to admit it, but when I agree to something, sometimes it’s just to get you off my back. I think, “Well, I’ll do it if I get time.” But if it’s something I really don’t want to do, often I simply don’t make the time. I’m also unreliable when my priorities collide with yours—and my priorities too often prevail. Unfortunately this means I really haven’t thought much about us being a true team where we can each count on the other to follow through. There is one more reason I don’t like to admit. I have a strong tendency to be lazy about doing things I don’t like doing.”
4. “I actually have some interest in improving my reliability. Doing so would get you off my back, I would feel more in alignment with my higher intentions about being a good partner, and we could have more fun together.”
5. “Finally, I want you to get off my back and stop policing me to make sure I follow through. Both of us will feel better about that. So when I don’t follow through or give you a timely warning (stuff does happen), then I will work on cleaning the garage the following weekend for at least two hours every time I blow it.” (Cleaning the garage is an important but nonurgent task that I keep avoiding.)

To summarize, even mumbling “I’m sorry” can be quite restorative. You can also use any or all parts of this apology either verbally or in writing. Apologies are a great way to repair a rupture in your relationship.

Take the time to practice writing an apology. You can decide later whether or not to share it. Think of a time when you’ve blown it with your partner. Swallow your pride and write it down. This practice will help you in the future when you want to verbally apologize.

RETURN TO EDEN

— Session IV: CO-NARRATION —

OPENING

When Adam and Eve exited the Garden, they faced a multilayered crisis. Who are we? Where are we going? Why are we going there? These are all facets of one question: Now what?

They are now strangers in a strange land with a lot more questions than answers. Their task is to develop the story of their future.

What about you? How often do you regroup and ask “Where are we headed?” Do we like the direction we are going? Why or why not?

Are you consciously developing your future or mostly reacting to the demands of your present life? Are you just grateful if you have an ounce of leftover energy before collapsing into bed?

Topic 1

Flourishing couples create shared goals together and continually revisit their relationship and refresh their dreams for the future. This might include regular time together away from the children, getaways, community service, discussions of values and plans. Have you done any of these? Would you be interested in starting? Why, or why not?

Topic 2

Let's get specific about how you and your partner might explore new renewal efforts. Have you heard any new ideas you'd be interested in trying? Would you like to create a vision board by cutting out photos or sayings from magazines that represent what you would like to do, have, or become? How often would you like to do these activities?

Topic 3

The First Love Story: Pages 262–266, What Does It Mean to Co-Narrate Your Relationship?

Because we're talking about storytelling here, if your marriage were a book, what would the title be? Are you happy with the way it would end? If not, how would you like it to end? What about the movie of your marriage? Describe the final scene that you would like!

FINAL EXERCISE from Pete and Ellyn

Revitalize Your Love Life and Your Future: Creating Your Relationship Vision

In our work with couples, we like to help them formulate a vision of the kind of life they would like to create together. A powerful vision involves recalling and revising the important dreams you had when you first got together and identifying new hopes, as well. Sometimes this means exploring “little buds” that are unconscious but waiting to blossom.

A vision contains something you really want and evokes enough passion that you are willing to invest sustained effort to bring it about. Your vision contains strong desires that are aligned with your values and supported by a plan.

To think creatively about the type of relationship you desire, ask each other a few of the following 20 questions on a dinner date or set up a special time to explore these together.

They will help you connect on a deeper level than the usual topics of careers, kids, vacations, politics, and movies. They

can illuminate areas of joy, passion, and connection. Most couples ask each other questions like these when they first meet, but as time hurtles by, these meaningful questions get neglected and then abandoned.

They'll be the starting point for an interesting and stimulating conversation that will create the foundation for your vision

Developing Your Partnership Vision

- What things in your life bring you the greatest pleasure?
- What things do you look forward to each day?
- What excites you about the future?
- In what settings are you the happiest and most comfortable?
- On your drive to work, what consumes your mind the majority of the time?
- In a regular day, what do you find yourself thinking about the most in addition to work?
- If you could change one or two things in your life, what would they be, and why?
- What accomplishments do you value most in your life so far?
- If you had three wishes that would come true, what would they be?
- When you reach the rocking-chair stage of your life, what will you wish you had done that you didn't do?
- Is there a belief or attitude that seems to interfere with creating or pursuing a big dream?
- What activities do you most like to do by yourself?
- What are a couple things that you appreciate about our relationship, and why do these things seem significant?
- How strong is your desire to do something together?
- Describe a memory of a time when you felt like we collaborated well.
- What kinds of projects or activities would you consider doing together?
- What projects or activities do you think we do well together?
- What talents or strengths do you believe we each bring to a future project?
- What do I do that brings out the best in you?

• *Bonus Question:* What would be the next step you suggest we take from here?

Here are some guidelines to help you get the most out of these conversations. Treat your partner's answers with respect. Please don't argue or negatively judge any of your partner's responses. Be like a compassionate reporter who is exploring an unknown subject. Ask your partner to do the same for you.

You will be delicately ferreting out the overlap in all the answers to arrive at what is most meaningful to each of you. Don't simply race through the questions. This process takes time and dedication, yet returning to these questions will pay huge dividends in your life together. What has changed that you appreciate and don't appreciate?

The More Detail Your Vision Has, the More Compelling It Will Be

For example, Sarah and Jim repetitively used this exercise over time. From the beginning, Sarah answered what excites her about the future by saying "leaving a legacy."

Jim responded to the question of what kinds of projects or activities he would consider doing together by saying that he'd like to work on something together for the well-being of their children. As they asked each other these questions again and again, their responses evolved.

Their answers would incubate and stimulate additional ideas. One session would prove to be a springboard for the next. Sara and Jim eventually decided they wanted to do something for their children, which also met Sarah's desire to leave a legacy.

Their answers kept returning to doing something that reflected their interests in teaching and strengthening the family. They both believed the old saying that if you really want to learn something, then you should teach it.

They decided to begin with teaching a Sunday school class together. After sitting through some tedious Sunday school classes when they were children, they decided they would make it enjoyable for themselves and the kids. They became increasingly passionate about creating a very different learning experience for kids in Sunday school.

In the beginning, they did not discuss potential obstacles. Because the best way to kill a budding dream is to ask how it could possibly happen. Rather, Sarah and Jim jumped in and discovered they enjoyed teaching together.

Through trial and error, they learned a lot about collaborating and how to better negotiate when they had sharp differences of opinion.

However, they also discovered they did not like the bureaucracy telling them what to teach.

Over time, they kept returning to their vision questions. Eventually, they started a small, interfaith Sunday school with other families who had a similar vision. The project was more work than they had anticipated. Much more. But the work they had put into building a collaborative vision and learning to negotiate sustained them through the tougher times.

You will know you have accurately described your vision when

- the results are hard to achieve; success will require “stretching”
- you are excited when you think about it
- the results of the vision are meaningful to you
- the results make a difference in your life and your partner’s life
- the results are visible, can be written down, and, at least to some degree, can be measured
- the results will reflect your strengths and core values

Your vision will evolve as you move toward it. You will meet obstacles along the way. Ask yourself an important question: “What will I have to do that I don’t want to do to realize this vision?” Every worthwhile vision carries with it some undesirable tasks. Don’t let these make you believe your vision is wrong. Accept that your vision will involve some challenges that you won’t enjoy.

Realizing your vision as a couple will require new skills in problem-solving, negotiation, and decision-making. They’re not always intuitive. And remember: You can’t create a flourishing relationship just by fixing what is wrong. You achieve your vision by building on the best in each of you.

RETURN TO EDEN

— ADDENDUM —

*Thanks for using our guide to enrich your relationship journey.
We leave you with a final article to anchor your positive intentions.*

TWO QUESTIONS TO REVITALIZE YOUR MARRIAGE

You and your partner formed a relationship for many reasons.

One of the strongest is the desire for a deeper and ongoing connection with another human... a connection that allows you to be spontaneous, real, supported, sexy, and adventurous.

At the time, you hoped you had created a connection that would lead to a richer life.

But it's possible that you and your partner might have lost your way after the initial euphoria of being together.

Many factors are involved in getting lost. One of them is losing sight of your core values in the busyness of everyday life.

It is rare for most people to reflect very often on core values. That's an indicator that we rarely spend much time thinking about the purpose of our own life or relationship.

It can be a mind-bending question, "What is the purpose of my life?" or "What is the purpose of my relationship?" So it is understandable we avoid it.

But there might be a way of generating clarity with just two questions.

The two questions can expose your core values. And your core values are really your compass, your North Star, and your beacon while traveling on your life and relationship journey.

Here are the questions:

1. Who are the people you admire the most? They can be living or dead, real or fictional, ones you know or only have heard about. Make a list of these admired people.
2. Why do you admire them? List the qualities of each person that are so admirable.

Then look for the overlapping qualities across those people. Reduce the list to the three to five most important qualities.

These will give you a good idea of your personal core values.

This is a good exercise for you and your partner to do and share with each other. Think about these qualities on a regular basis and reflect how much you are aligned with them as you go through the day and your relationship.

When you and your partner get into disagreements, or are faced with big decisions, put them into the context of "How would I apply my core values to this discussion, decision, or situation?"

If the values are relevant, then you will have increased your clarity about how to respond or what to decide.

If you don't create clarity with these qualities, then redo the exercise.

Is it easy to live aligned with your core values? Of course not. But one of the reasons the people on your admired list are there is that they embody their core values in how they live.

There they are—two powerful questions. Who do I admire? And why do I admire them?