

How to live, love and work together

Guest: Ty Powers

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Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]

Hello and welcome to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am so happy to be joined by Ty Powers. Welcome, Ty.

Ty Powers

Thank you, Jaia. Nice to see you.

Jaia Bristow

Nice to see you too. Thank you for taking the time to be with us today.

So, Ty Powers is the co-founder of the Insight Yoga Institute and has been leading Buddhist mindfulness meditation retreats throughout the world for over 25 years. He completed the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leader training program in 2003 and has led day long retreats on cultural diversity. Ty offers one on one sessions in internal family systems and as a change and transition strategist and certified integral coach. Recently Ty joined the board of studio BE as senior ethics advisor.

As well as all of this, Ty is a dear family friend of mine, so I am particularly happy to be doing this interview together.

So Ty, to start off, do you want to tell us a little bit more about you and your relationship with Sarah Powers, who not only is the other co-founder of the Insight Yoga Institute, but is also your romantic partner and wife.

Ty Powers

Sure. So Sarah and I have been together now for almost 40 years. It'll be 40 years this year. And, well, I'm a little bit flustered just by thinking about that and the fact that it has been an extraordinary 40 years. She is almost 10 years my junior, I'm 67 and we have a child out of that beautiful relationship. And she's almost 30 now, almost your age. And we met, I was 28, she was 19. So I was very much in the world at that point. And she was very much not.

So I think our relationship started with me being already fully engaged in the spiritual practice, and she was studying psychology and English literature. So English lit was really giving her a lit up sense of humanity as English literature can do. It can somehow, the poetry of English literature can really offer insight into who we are in ways that just straight history cannot and moving that over into the psychology or philosophy of who we are. So we really met on that level that even though she was still growing up, I was in the process of, what in the Buddhist community is called waking up.

And so once she got on board with that, she really took that and ran with it and in fact, really began to take the lead a few years after that and really developed herself as a yoga teacher, starting there and a counselor and then a Buddhist practitioner and mindfulness teacher as well.

So then we just started to develop along those lines together really, even though I'm much older. I was working in a totally different field. I started out in television and management there, and I really quit all that in order to really begin to dive into a full fledged life of practice.

And so for her to bring that back around to the business of it, I ended up supporting her in her trajectory journey of doing what she does, becoming actually world renowned in her field. And I sort of took a backseat at that point and really helped her from the background to realize this. Because there's a lot of work to building the business that we did, which was the Insight Yoga Institute, and then just raising a family. And I wouldn't say a lot of that, but a fair amount of that fell to me. I was the taxi driver for our daughter for many years and so on. And the one who was doing the website and doing the business and answering the phones and the emails and all that stuff which just ended up being a big thing for that period.

So we are now, as I said, almost 40 years in. We're living in London right now. We have split London and Malta and Mallorca, which has been really wonderful. And that's been just a result of not being able to fully live in either place because of visas. We only get 6 months in the U.K, we only get 6 months in the EU. We still have a house in California which is rented. We're planning to move back there soon. That's a whole thing we could spend 45 minutes on. We won't.

So we're loving living here. We're loving our life right now. We're loving what we're offering as practices and what we're doing. And as you said, I'm seeing people one on one in the context of internal family systems, which is what IFS means, and that is a modality for working with inner parts, as they're called or what you might think of as our inner committee. So that complex of sub personalities that we all have that are all vying for attention inside, the structure that's us. And the extent to which those voices are integrated is the extent to which we'll feel whole, the extent to which we're not, to the extent to which they're at war, is the extent to which we will feel fragmented and we will suffer.

So it's a wonderful bit of work that I offer as part of Buddhist practice, part of Buddhist mindfulness meditation.

I think you've got a little sense of where I am and who we are in that. Any questions carry on.

Jaia Bristow - [00:06:08]

Wonderful. So I guess my first question is, do you feel that your spiritual practices and the internal family systems practices is what has supported you to have a successful relationship for 40 years or what are some other things that might have supported you?

Ty Powers

Yeah. So early on, having a spiritual practice is certainly a way to give one reason to pause and soften in the midst of dealing inside a relationship. So I think very early on we were on to the idea of not letting our parts, as it were, rain, especially when things get rough in relationship. So there was that sense, just in terms of what I was studying, that was brought to the relationship that we both honored, to an extent. Things still got out of hand, but that was the bedrock of, we're going to work this out no matter what.

And then on top of that is we both have therapists. And of course, I think everyone should have a therapist. Everyone should have someone that they speak with about their internal family, for example. And that really helped.

And then I think the thing that was really a lynch pin is one particular therapist offered us something to do that we called, she may have called it this, I'm not sure, but we call our 10 minutes. And what it is, is in the midst of a difficult conversation, let's call it an argument, what it is, someone calls time out. And whoever calls time out gets their quote, "10 minutes". It doesn't have to be 10 minutes, it could be a half hour.

But how that works is at the point that that person calls time, they get to say whatever they need to say for whatever amount of time they need to say it. They need to do it in the context of trying to have it heard. In other words, taking responsibility for how something landed, not saying, for example, you made me feel. Saying instead, I felt, as a result of what you said, so again, taking responsibility for how it landed, not what they did. And then trying to actually explain to the other person or have them feel exactly how you're feeling in this moment and then carrying that through, as I say, for whatever amount of time that takes.

And then the other person cannot answer that day. And this is also a huge part of it, because as you'll know just from relationships you've had, when you're in the midst of an argument you're talking over each other, you're both in your quote, "protector modes", and you're really bypassing hearing each other. You're just angry or upset or frustrated or whatever it is. And so things just aren't getting through.

And so one of the first things that happened in this exercise is, let's say Sarah calls it, and I'm sitting there listening, and she's quote, "blaming me" for something, at least that's how I'm taking it. And all I can do is think about my rebuttal. And then as it goes on, as I realized, wait a second this is not the operational mode of this exercise. I really need to at least try to listen and not make up the story of how I need to come back at this.

And I remember that turning point where I really just stopped trying to protect and just started to listen and it shifted everything. Because what I heard was. my sweetheart is hurt. Whether I caused it or not, we can deal with that in another moment, but she's hurt, and I want to attend to that. And the same happened to her at a certain point.

And so that really, those exercises were happening a couple, three times a week for a time and then it would just start to space out where it got to be at a certain point, where we would just call for it, not in an argument, more like friends. I just need for you to sit down and listen to all my stuff and doesn't even have to be around you or about you. Just can you just be with me? And here's another key. And not try to attempt or even think about fixing me. Just hear me.

Jaia Bristow - [00:10:46]

Incredible. That sounds like a beautiful strategy. And so is that linked to internal family systems, or is that separate?

Ty Powers

Well, okay, so internal family systems, so bringing that online on top of all that is to understand that we have all these parts of us that have particular world views that were tenured, if you will, at certain times in our life. And so they are strategies of working with things that we didn't feel fully capable of working with at the time that these parts were tenured.

And so knowing that we have parts that are younger, that are less understanding of the big picture, understanding how we get into those parts and understanding when they happen, that right there helps us look at each other and go, oh, oh, so this is a part. And we don't necessarily use that kind of language or say that in the moment because that's triggering actually, it's like no, don't do that. Don't tell me I'm in a part right now. I just need you to feel me.

But there is this sense of okay, I know that part and that part's, really, that's an angry part. That's a part that feels unseen or whatever we might call it. And so I'm just gonna back down for a minute and be

with this part over there. Or be with this part for myself internally knowing that I'm in a part, knowing that I'm blended with a part and not seeing the big picture.

So yes, IFS in that sense, has been really incredible. Similarly to the enneagram, which I know you know, and I know your parents know really well. And maybe you can explain that to the audience at some point or another point, or maybe you already have.

Jaia Bristow - [00:12:26]

We have a guest speaker, Dr Robert Holden, talking specifically about the enneagram on this conference.

Ty Powers

So just knowing what our enneagram type is, is really beneficial to knowing similarly, so that's certain types default to certain modes of behavior in certain circumstances. And so knowing that about the other and one's self, helps you to go, oh, okay, that's what's going on right now. So there's a little more of a objectivity rather than just the pure emotional subjectivity or whatever is arising in the moment.

So yeah, there's a lot of modalities. Certainly the work that you're involved with, with Almaas who's one of the creators of the enneagram, or at least one of the most well known today.

We studied that work. So we bring that into the work that we do, too. And, of course, into the relationship so it's really, it's so fun to have all these modalities to look to in moments of stress in relationship.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. And it sounds like, like you say, that there's lots of different layers, there's lots of different elements, lots of different tools that you use that are interconnected and that are supportive in your relationship together.

Ty Powers

Yeah. And one of the biggest things, and again, you'll recognize this for yourself, is there is something about us that seems to want the other to be more like us. And that's really a very important point, a key point, I think. And the more we've allowed ourselves to pursue and be our individualistic selves, the better it's gotten. There's still the tendency that, you could have done that better, you could have done it more like this, that arises in any relationship. But we're largely letting that go as any dominant feature of wishing the other would be more like me.

Jaia Bristow

That sounds really helpful, too. And what I'm hearing is really about seeing the other person for who they are and their individuality and also recognizing the different parts in oneself and in the other person. But when we get identified with a certain part doesn't mean that's all of who we are, that's maybe who we are feeling in the moment.

And that just the global picture of being able to see the other person for who they are and their different parts, and being able to connect to one's own different parts has helped this beautiful, long lasting relationship between the two of you.

Ty Powers

Well, that's a really good way to put it. And on top of that is the sense, the ever growing sense that I can't really really know this person entirely, even though I think I might. Which, of course, goes for one self as well. I mean, I have a pretty rounded sense of myself in general and more specifically, of

course, but I don't fully know who I am. And so extending that sense of possibility and curiosity to the other person is also really a wonderful thing to offer, to extend. And we're feeling more of that with each other the older we get.

Jaia Bristow - [00:15:52]

Wonderful. That's so nice to hear that after so many decades together there's still the element of curiosity and excitement of getting to know the other person. And I think sometimes it's hard to admit that someone doesn't know themselves entirely, let alone know the person they're sharing their life with.

Ty Powers

Yeah. I think it can be kind of dangerous to say I know who I am. I think someone who is fully awake can say that, I wouldn't call myself fully awake, I would say that I'm living a more enlightened life than I was yesterday and the day before. But in terms of fully knowing who I am, I'm in discovery, and that's really exciting.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. I love that and I 100% agree. And I love that idea of being in discovery of oneself and the other person.

And so I'm curious as well, because, as well as living together and raising a family together, you obviously both work together. So what's that been like, navigating a professional and personal life at the same time?

Ty Powers

It's been really joyous the last, I don't know, 15 years or so. In the early days it was rough, in the early days, especially, it was really, it kind of happened all at once in that she was invited to, there used to be these big yoga conferences in the U.S. where it was really the place, you're sort of coming out event because there'd be hundreds and hundreds of people there. And it was really a smorgasbord of all the teachers that were out there offering whatever they were offering.

And the first year that Sarah was invited to this, it was just like a Thursday through Sunday. On Monday we got home to, I remember the numbers because it freaked me out, to 33 phone calls and 55 emails with inquiries and invitations for her to start traveling around the world, coming to different yoga centers and such.

And so she looked at that and just went, you've got to stop everything. Can you stop everything and just take me through this? Help me through this because there's no way I can, because I had my own thing going at that point.

And so I think we had done maybe a couple of retreats, but they would be once or twice a year. I'd organize that. That was the end of it. I go back to what I was doing. So this was the bonafide, you've got to stop everything and start helping me. So I jumped in headlong, which meant we've got to build a website, we've got to do this, we've got to do that. So I became everything, the planner, the travel agent, as I said, the person who was the taxi driver for our daughter at that time, who was just being shuttled to all these places, she was home schooled so I was also the home school parent, so offering curriculum for that.

And so it felt early on overwhelming to build a business, to be the one behind the scenes and holding the load while just allowing her, which I was happy to do on the level that I was happy to do it, for her to just practice, because now she's entering a global phase, a global stage, and to really try and make that transition as easy as possible for her, which meant taking all the stuff behind the scenes.

And of course, inevitably it would overwhelm me. Stuff would fall through the cracks. She'd see that and go, why did you let that fall through the cracks? And so those were the early cracks in, like, wait a minute, wait a frigging minute. Do you know how up to here I am? And then those were the early big conversations, discussions, difficult conversations around you're not doing this like I would do it and the way I would do it. Well, no, I'm not. No, I won't.

And then a little bit of personal stubbornness that happens in relationship, even though you see the good sense of what the other person's saying, you kind of hunker down because you don't want to admit, all the array of things we do to safe face as it were. I didn't do that a tremendous amount, but enough that it really became a huge point of contingent.

In fact, one of the largest arguments we had, we were on holiday. We were up at Findhorn in Scotland, and a few things fell through the cracks while we were on holiday, and it just came to a head. And we had one of those arguments where I was up to here with everything. And she was saying, you can't handle it. And she was right. And she was saying, we've got to hire someone.

And I said, I'm up to here. I can't imagine what it would take to train someone since I'm already up to here. And she said, well, I'm just not waiting. I'm calling someone today, and she did. And I fretted and pouted and did what I did. And it was one of the best things that happened.

So once I got over the hump of, I'm going to be busier in order to be less busy. Once I saw the good sense of that, which didn't make sense in the moment, then it changed everything and these last few years have been really easy because we've had really, really good assistance. And so that's allowed me to also move more forward in terms of a teaching position because I'm not doing so much behind the scenes anymore.

Jaia Bristow - [00:21:36]

Fantastic. And I'm curious, you've answered this already a little bit, but I'm curious about, on a very personal level, the dynamics as well, taking into account the age difference, the gender dynamics and the racial dynamics. Because I know you're in an interracial relationship, Sarah Powers is white and you are not. So factoring all that in, that suddenly the fact that you were doing your own thing, and then suddenly you were put into a supportive, behind the scenes role. What was the impact on you in that way?

Ty Powers

You know, at the time, it really was okay. It really, I didn't have the, I had the passion for practice, which, of course, is a personal thing. I didn't have the passion to go out there and talk about it or teach it. And so since she did, that felt totally right. Yeah, I'll support this, it's really great. And I'm really honored with the position that I was taking in it.

The interesting thing is it seemed to be more of a thing for other people or society than it was for me. And it started to give me pause because people would ask me, so how do you feel about being in the background? How do you feel about being the guy and your woman's making all the money and all that? And so then, I kind of like, really is that how I should be looking at it? So it did give me pause for a while to take a look at that and go, all right, well, is that really a function of my manhood, that I should be out in front doing all that gender stuff that fortunately, we're turning around now.

And so I'd like to say I was just ahead of the curve.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I love that you recognize, you both recognized in that moment the fact that she had a passion to be in the front and teaching and that you felt like you wanted to support that. And your passion was more just working on yourself rather than having to teach that. And that it makes total

sense for you then to fall into the roles you fell into because of where you were both at in your lives and what you were interested in.

And then noticing as well how society was putting all these pressures and expectations on you. But being able to again, probably because of the spiritual practices and the self awareness, to notice that and to notice these questions, but not take that on board. That sounds really incredible.

Ty Powers - [00:24:03]

Yeah. It was a process, of course, of not taking it on board because it really did come up a lot. Well, then to answer your question then about, so I guess that is an answer, one answer to your question about the gender difference there. Just heterosexual male, the sort of normative relationship that we have somewhat in reverse. I would say I have a fair amount of feminine capacity in terms of how I operate, emote, respond, communicate. And she has a fair amount of masculine in that getting out there in the world and rough and tumble kind of thing and making that happen.

And we kind of shift back and forth with that. But it feels nicely integrated between the two of us. And then on top of that is the race card, if you will. And, of course, having gotten together 40 years ago, there were places in the United States, in particular, that we just didn't want to go. The south, and not just the south, I mean, that's over giving the south a bad name because there were places outside of Los Angeles or outside of San Francisco, just an hour or even less that could be just as racist around a couple like us as the south.

And so it could be difficult. There were some family members, not my family members, but some other family members who were not on board with it and made that quite vocal. And we both had grown up though, Sarah had black friends before me. And I grew up, there's interracial mixes in my family and just family friends were all over the place. So there was never, even though we grew up in east LA, which is, I don't know if you know, it was all black, even though we grew up there, we had a really different relationship with white society even there, than most black people did.

So I just didn't grow up with the sense of that separation that we're still seeing unfortunately today. So amongst us, between us, we were just loving us. It was more what came at us from around us that made the difference.

And just to carry that a little bit further, that made more of a difference to our daughter than we thought it might, who passes for white. And she feels equally comfortable in both communities, white and black, obviously. She'd like for black people to know that she has that as part of her makeup from the outside. But it also points out the folly of attempting to identify someone by their skin color.

So she would have liked me to respond a little more forcefully to some of the things she saw me go through. This is a very interesting part of the topic I think, you may relate to this yourself. There was certainly, even though I had beautiful relationships with family members and friends who were of all colors, going out to society, especially growing up in the 50s and 60s and so on was not pleasant in very many zones.

And so that produced a lot of frustration and anger in me in those days. And so when Imani was born, of course things were better, but she was born during the Rodney King riots. And so when all of the frustration that would arise from me around things like that, the verdict, for example, I tried to keep a low tone on that for her so that she didn't carry my burdens around race into her heart and into her future.

And interestingly, about 7 years ago, she went to a very big psychological program called The Hoffman Process, and she came out of it with some anger towards me. It was really like, so beautiful and so heart wrenching. She said, I wish you had shown me more anger for what I saw you go through.

Because she saw people follow me around, white passing, she saw people follow me around department stores and treat me in certain ways as we walked into a store or a restaurant that she didn't see when she walked into a restaurant alone or a department store with her mom who's white.

And so she saw that difference, and I was trying to not necessarily hide it from her but not react to it in a way that would cause her to react. And instead it did anyway. So this is an interesting thing about how kids also pick up the shadow that their parents don't offer upfront.

Jaia Bristow - [00:29:15]

It's interesting because, of course, I can relate as a light skinned, mixed woman myself, a similar age to your daughter. And then the difference is, I grew up in France and the U.K, and she grew up in the U.S. I'm sure there are some cultural differences there as well. And I noticed how I sometimes struggled with, in my case, it's my mum who is black and my dad who is white, and just noticing as well my own relationship to race and the way I'm treated.

But I often had something slightly different where, for example, when people see me and my white father together, people are more likely to assume we're partners than father and daughter, which is incredibly uncomfortable.

Ty Powers

Same! Same! Okay. Yes. And I'm 15 years older than your dad, more. Yeah. So it feels kind of icky doesn't it?

Jaia Bristow

Yeah. I think it's not something that's talked about a lot. We talk sometimes about interracial relationships, but the impact on the mixed children and again, mixed children there's such a broad range. So like my brother, who has the same two parents as me, he's much darker skinned and he looks black, whereas I'm light skinned and I don't quite look white but I'm often just considered "exotic" or like people are curious.

So it's really interesting to hear about the impact. And in terms of the gender dynamics between you and Sarah, how do you think that impacted your daughter, raising a daughter with almost opposite traditional gender roles in her parents?

Ty Powers

I think really, really well, in the sense that I think all young women, girls need to see some version of a strong mother. I'm not saying they need to go out into the world. I'm not at all denigrating someone who chooses to stay home and do that. But for her to have an example of Sarah going out into the world, traveling the world, all over the world and being successful in that way, I think has been a really great motivating force for her. I can do this. I see it. It's in my house. So like that.

In terms of the men she's chosen, they've been all over the place. A Nigerian, a Moroccan, an American white guy, a U.K. white guy. Yeah. So I don't see her even necessarily making a choice that looks so much like me or not. She's just kind of all over the place. So it remains to be seen where she ends up with all this. But yeah, I think it's been really great for her to have her mom be in the lead. But also she knows how much I do behind the scenes. And also she's seen me the last 10 years or so as a teacher, as a bonafide teacher out there, so she's really proud of that.

Jaia Bristow

So I'm curious to hear more about this transition for you, from being in a behind the scenes role to being more a teaching role yourself and how that's impacted your relationship as well. And how that's

impacted both your relationship with yourself and your relationship with Sarah, that you're no longer just supporting her. You're also teaching and in front of the camera, as it were, yourself.

Ty Powers - 100:32:55]

Yeah. Well, Sarah's absolutely thrilled. She's just thrilled because, so part of the conversation that ended up with her getting someone to help me was a dinner in which I said to her, I want your life. Not necessarily meaning that I wanted to teach, but I wanted the feeling of more it's all taken care of. I wanted that feeling of relaxation that I knew I was giving her.

And when she heard that, it was like a moment for her of ah, this has gotten, it's been great, but this has gotten to a point where that's not what I want for you either. So how can we shift this?

So for her to see me shift into having the help I need, and then as a result of that, thinking more about what I want to offer has just been thrilling for her.

So I would say it's shifted the relationship in an even better place because she's feeling me being less stressed, which everyone wants to feel their partner that way.

Jaia Bristow

Yeah, I think a lack of stress can only be beneficial to a relationship!

Ty, how can people find out more about you and your work and your teaching? And I guess the work you do with Sarah as well, because I know you sometimes teach together as well as teaching your own retreats.

Ty Powers

I think the best thing to do is, I'm still building my personal website, but for what we do together, at which you can get to me from this as well, because I'm on the site, is the sarahpowersinsightyoga.com

And then you'll get a sense of our schedule. You can get to our assistant through there who will get to me if you're interested in the work that I do one on one as a change and transition strategist. By the way, this is the work coming out of Phillip Moffitt's Life Balance work. So there's only a few of us at this point, only 15 of us who have been trained in that way as change and transition strategists.

And so I feel honored to have been part of that 2 and a half year program, we're done, we've graduated, but we're still carrying on with the program, much like Diamond Heart does, it's ongoing, lifelong learning, if you will.

And so the combination of being able to offer that the strategy of change happens, transition does not necessarily happen. And I think people expect, more often than not, that the changes that happen to them will transit them into the next phase. And it doesn't. And that creates a lot of suffering and frustration. So that's the basis of that work.

So combining that and IFS, working with parts, committee members as Phillip Moffitt says, sub-personalities as Assar Jolie says, is really a beautiful way. Just one last thing to say about IFS that I think is so efficacious about it is it doesn't pathologize any part, any aspect of us. There's really this sense of not fixing anything of really understanding its particular point of view, its worldview and in understanding that view, being able to bring it online and on board into the system, so that it's not waring with other parts of the system.

So it's a phenomenal way to work. And then on top of all, that the Dharma. That's how I work personally. And so you can get to me through our website. I'm pretty busy right now, but there's always openings here and there.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for your time today and thank you for talking so openly about your relationship and the different practices you do, I really appreciate it.

Ty Powers

Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity.