

SHALLOW TALK AND SEPARATE SPACES

1
2
3 Sarah was frustrated as she drove home from work. Always too much to do and never
4 enough time. She was working way too much and she knew it. But she didn't know how to say
5 no when asked to do more. She was still not finished with the midyear report and, to make
6 matters worse, tomorrow night she was facing an exam in the course she was taking for her
7 Master's degree. She was tired and hungry and hoped that Russell had started dinner. She turned
8 the corner onto the driveway and pushed the automatic opener for the garage door. By the time
9 it was halfway up she saw that Russell's car was not there. "Well, I guess Russell won't be
10 helping with dinner again," she muttered half out loud. "Why is everything my responsibility?"

11 As Sarah entered the kitchen she saw the message light flashing on the answering
12 machine. "Hi, Hon," said Russell's voice. "It's just me. Wanted to let you know that I will be a
13 little late getting home. Hope your day was good. See you soon."

14 Sarah felt her mood darken even more. It was already 5:30, and she didn't feel like
15 cooking or waiting to eat. But she looked through the refrigerator until she found the makings of
16 a salad, leftover pork chops and some aging potatoes. She washed the breakfast dishes in the sink
17 as she prepared dinner. "Geez, he can't even do the dishes when he knows that I am under such
18 pressure," she thought to herself. "Tonight after dinner I am going to ask him to give me a little
19 help around the house, at least until the end of the semester—maybe take care of dinner and
20 dishes during the week and laundry on Saturday."

21 A short time later Russell pulled into the garage. Sarah was putting dinner on the table
22 when he came into the kitchen. He too was tired and the residue of his stressful day lingered.
23 "Ugh, what a day," he said. "I thought James and Mark would never get out of my office. Get
24 this, they want me to do a survey of the entire county by the end of the month."

25 "Well, at least you don't have the same stupid report from last week still hanging around
26 your neck like albatross, and an exam coming up that you haven't even studied for."

27 "Of course I don't. But then I wouldn't let anyone walk all over me like you let the folks
28 at C&G do to you."

29 Sarah bristled, "I can't help it," she said.

30 "Well, you *can*, but you *won't*," Russell responded. Then, looking at the table, he
31 remarked, "Pork chops? We had pork chops last night. And Sunday on the grill."

32 Sarah tried very hard to control her anger, but her voice was sharp. "Yes, we are having
33 pork chops. If you want something else, you can fix it."

34 Russell answered without thinking, "Let's just go out for dinner."

35 "Go out?" Sarah snapped, "After I made dinner? Since when can we afford to throw
36 away food? Or is it that my cooking is just too awful."

37 "I never said your cooking was awful; I just don't feel like pork chops. Lighten up."

38 "Lighten up? Easy for you to say. You don't have to work full time, take care of the
39 house, do all the shopping, and work on your Master's degree."

40 Russell felt his fatigue turning into anger. "Oh no, it's the poor-me-routine; you give and
41 give and I do nothing. I don't mow the lawn, pay the bills, buy the groceries, cook as often as
42 you do, and clean the house every Saturday."

43 "Oh? Since when? You never do anything around the house; its work all week and golf
44 all weekend."

45 "Oh, so it's my fault that nothing gets done? Maybe I do my work all week because I am
46 not allowed to make noise in this precious house. All I ever hear from you is "Please be quiet

47 I'm studying. You know, my Master's degree, my Master's degree. Can't watch TV, I have
48 homework. Can't go out, I have an exam. Can't have sex anymore, gotta work on my Master's
49 degree. At least I get some peace and companionship on the golf course."

50 "Oh, you're exaggerating, as usual. I do not make you be quiet, I do more than my share
51 around here, and we...we have sex. You're making me out to be a monster."

52 "Well, frankly, Sarah, that's about it. You have the patience of a gnat, and you're just
53 about as much fun. We have sex when the moon is full, and we never make love any more. I
54 practically have to beg you to come to bed, and a man gets pretty tired of begging for something
55 from his wife that other women offer freely."

56 "What's that supposed to mean? Are you looking at other woman now?" Sarah felt
57 resentful. She knew that there were problems in the bedroom and that she was partly to blame.
58 But she resented Russell making her feel so guilty; it was certainly not all her fault. "Why are
59 you saying this? I can't help it if I'm tired. Maybe if I got some help around here I'd have more
60 energy. I'm carrying a heave load here. You knew I was going to continue my education when
61 we got married."

62 "Oh, yes, but I didn't know that it would consume your life and our marriage. Now I have
63 to worship at altar Heavy Load. The pressures of work and, oh, the pressure of that blessed
64 Master's degree. All bow in honor to the Heavy Load."

65 Sarah felt pushed into a corner. She felt that Russell was attacking the very core of who
66 she was—a good student, a high achiever. "Well, at least I'm capable of getting a Master's
67 degree. I don't see you in college Mr. Einstein. In fact, you barely got out with a bachelor's
68 degree. We had to drag you off the course for graduation—or did you even graduate? I can't
69 quite remember."

70 Russell stoop up so abruptly that Sarah was startled, "I know you don't think I'm very
71 smart. Certainly I'll never meet you standards. I don't know why you married such a stupid guy.
72 But I'll tell you Sarah, I'm a good man with or without an advanced degree! I don't need a piece
73 of paper to prove I'm worth something, but you sure do. We've been married almost two years
74 and you are still not a wife. When are you going to grow up?"

75 He moved to the door before Sarah could respond. "I'm going out to eat," he said, "and to
76 enjoy my own ignorant company."

77 "Well, good," Sarah yelled back, "you are the only one who can!" Sarah was agitated as
78 she picked up the dishes and tossed the uneaten food in the trash. As she cleaned the kitchen, she
79 fought back tears. *Why does this always happen. I promise myself I will be rational, but I get
80 defensive and, bang, we are on the downward slope. I didn't think marriage would be like this.
81 Why can't he be a little more supportive of what I'm going through? "Still not a wife"? What
82 kind of crack is that? I'm more grown up than he will ever be.*

83 Later that evening, Sarah was working at the computer when Russell returned. She heard
84 him click on the television downstairs and she thought about going down to talk to him. Instead,
85 she decided that if he wanted to talk he could just as easily come up to see her. *But he probably
86 won't, she thought; he's too stubborn. Besides he said some hurtful things and he owed her an
87 apology.*

88 Russell stared mindlessly at the television. He knew that he and Sarah needed to talk, but
89 he just couldn't endure another heated argument. He knew that he shouldn't have brought up the
90 sex thing again but she was never "in the mood" anymore. Every night was a struggle just to get
91 her to turn off that darn computer and come to bed. She seemed to think that Master's degree
92 was more important than he was. She was always so serious, about everything. Heaven forbid

93 that a smile should cross her face. And then, oh that remark about his grades! Maybe he wasn't
94 the best student in the world, but he graduated and got a good job. And he was doing well. Why
95 didn't she ever acknowledge that? Better to sit here, he thought, and keep his ego intact than to
96 try another discussion. He loved his wife, but lately all they seemed to do was argue. *I just can't*
97 *deal with this any more*, he decided. *Maybe if I just don't say anything about anything for*
98 *awhile, things will settle down*. Russell fell asleep in the recliner and work up some time after
99 midnight. He found Sarah already in bed asleep. As quietly as he could, he slipped under the
100 covers. Sarah was awakened by his movements and thought about apologizing. But the last thing
101 she needed to hear was how selfish she was. He didn't even seem to care about her needs, only
102 his own—sex, sex, sex. Sarah lay there in the darkness very still, pretending to be asleep. Both
103 lay awake for some time—feeling frustrated, rejected, angry, and hurt.

104 So it continued for several days. Sarah got through her exam and finished her report.
105 Russell got caught up at work and tried to be more helpful around the house, but only when he
106 didn't need to be in the same room as Sarah. The distance between them was chilling. Shallow
107 talk and separate spaces. Neither one brought up an issue that might cause conflict. They
108 showed no affection and closed each other out. Both were beginning to feel the strain in their
109 relationship.

110 On Sunday afternoon, Russell was golfing and Sarah was working on her studies. The
111 telephone rang. Her older sister, Betty, was in a good mood and began chatting about her family.
112 The kids were doing this and that, Fred was refinishing some furniture. After a few minutes she
113 paused. "Is something wrong? You seem sort of down?"

114 "Yeah, I guess I am," Sarah replied. "Russell and I had another fight."

115 "Oh, dear. What about this time?"

116 "I don't know. Just the same old stuff. He won't help around the house, but when I bring
117 it up, he gets defensive about my Master's degree and starts complaining that we never have sex
118 anymore. How am I supposed to feel sexy when I have to do everything around here? Besides,
119 even when I am willing to have sex, he still complains because we aren't "making love"—
120 whatever that means. We just can't seem to discuss anything without a big fight."

121 "Oh, I know how that is."

122 "You do? But you and Fred never fight."

123 "Au contraire, sister dear. Fred and I used to fight a lot, and we still have conflict but we
124 learned how to "fight fair."

125 "What do you mean by that?"

126 "Well, it seemed that most of our arguments began when we were tired. I would
127 complain about something and instead of just saying, yeah, you're right, Fred would complain
128 about something I did. Then I would get defensive and say he was wrong. Then he would say I
129 was too sensitive, and I would say he was selfish. I don't know why, but we just got into these
130 dueling matches that accomplished nothing but hurt feelings. So now, we try to take turns. If I
131 have a complaint, we deal with that complaint and put it to rest. If Fred has a complaint, we wait
132 and deal with it later. We try not to get the issue confused, and we try not to hit below the belt.
133 To call each other stupid or sarcastic or selfish solved nothing. It made us both feel hurt or angry
134 but did nothing to help the situation."

135 "Yeah, that's pretty much what happened around here." Sarah said. "Maybe we need
136 some ground rules for our conflict. Thanks for listening. Well, I need to get going. Tell the
137 family "hi" for me."

138 "Sure, will do. And good luck," said Betty as she hung up.

139 Later that afternoon, Russell returned home from his golf game, a bit more relaxed than
140 when he left, but still dreading the cold shoulder he was expecting from Sarah. He placed his
141 golf clubs in the closet and decided he had best find Sarah and offer to help with dinner. He
142 expected some kind of vague or curt reply, but he wanted to get it over with. "Sarah," he called.
143 "Are you upstairs?"

144 Sarah answered from the kitchen. She had already made dinner and Russell noticed it
145 wasn't pork chops. He wanted to smile at the thought of pork chops, but didn't dare risk it. He
146 expected her to criticize him for playing golf instead of staying home to do the cooking. So,
147 without saying anything, he just began setting the table. During dinner, Sarah seemed
148 particularly nice and even asked about his golf game. "It wasn't bad," he said. "I actually think
149 I'm getting better with my putts. I didn't squirrel to the right so much." Sarah considered for a
150 moment how much pride Russell took in his golf game. Not really very different from the pride
151 she took in her academic accomplishments.

152 After dinner, Russell began to clear the table. But Sarah stopped him and asked him to sit
153 with her for a few minutes and talk. "I want to apologize to you for my comment the other night
154 about you not being capable of getting a Master's degree. I know you could it you wanted to. I
155 was just angry and lashed out. But I really don't understand why you are so resentful of my
156 efforts to get an education."

157 Russell's first impulse was to list again the zillion times that her studies intruded on his
158 plans, his needs, his pleasures. But he paused and said instead, "I guess I just feel left out
159 sometimes. I need time with you, too. All I ever hear is you're so tired and so busy."

160 Sarah didn't respond immediately, but when she did, she chose her words carefully.
161 "You're right. I have been complaining a lot lately about my pressures at work and school. I
162 realize that I tend to close you out when I'm busy and I'm sorry for that. But I need your support,
163 not your resentment."

164 "Oh Sarah, I'm just not as good with words as you are. I don't resent you, I'm proud of
165 you. I suppose I should tell you that more often. I guess I just want to know there is some line
166 that you can draw for us, some period to be placed at the end of the work day when you put it all
167 away and relax. If that's not possible during the week, at least on the weekend. I want to be
168 supportive, but I feel disconnected from you sometimes, like everything else in your life is more
169 important than me. I have a job too and I'm doing pretty well at it. I would like to know you are
170 proud of me too, that my life matters, that I mean something more to you than a roommate who
171 helps around the house."

172 Sarah was struck by the sadness in Russell's voice, and she realized that the burden had
173 not been hers alone. She had not been physically or emotionally available to him for quite a
174 while. She always expected that being in a relationship meant she would have to give up some of
175 her autonomy, but she hadn't realized how careless she had been about sharing her time. Perhaps
176 more important, she had stopped showing how much she respected Russell, how much she
177 enjoyed his wit, his energy, his accomplishments and his ability to keep work and play in
178 proportion—all the things that had attracted her to him in the first place. She had become much
179 more likely to find fault than to tell him how much she valued him as her friend, her companion,
180 her lover and her husband. Impulsively, she leaned across the table and kissed him. "What do
181 you say to this? What if we agree that when we have a complaint, we try to keep it focused on
182 behavior, not personality, and that we really try to listen and be supportive even when we are
183 getting very angry? And let's try to stick to one person's complaint at a time. We just keep
184 dumping our own agendas on the table without listening to the other person's concerns."

185 “Well that sounds good, but it won’t be easy.”

186 “I know, but I think we have to try.”

187 “You’re right. And how about apologizing when we are wrong instead of going on the
188 attack?”

189 “You got it. Now how about helping me with these dishes and then maybe we can work
190 out something so I can have more free time for us?”

191 “Ugh, I guess that means making a list of household chores and dividing them up, huh?”

192 “Yeah, but this time, we’ll have three lists: household tasks, our own tasks, and things we
193 want to do together.”

194 Russell would have preferred that their life be a bit more spontaneous, especially where
195 sex was concerned, but Sarah was such a planner. Oh well, he thought, maybe that was a good
196 thing right now, given the challenges of being a dual-career couple. He had his doubts, but he
197 decided that he could at least try it her way and see what happened.