

PRINCIPLES OF THE CIRCLE OF TRUST APPROACH

If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone—at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. Taking an inner journey toward rejoining soul and role requires a rare but real form of community that I call a “circle of trust.” —Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness (adapted)*

- **Everyone has an inner teacher:** Every person has access to an inner source of truth, named in various wisdom traditions as identity, true self, heart, spirit or soul. The inner teacher is a source of guidance and strength that helps us find our way through life’s complexities and challenges. Circles of Trust give people a chance to listen to this source, learn from it and discover its imperatives for their work and their lives.
- **Inner work requires solitude and community:** In Circles of Trust we make space for the solitude that allows us to learn from within, while supporting that solitude with the resources of community. Participants take an inner journey in community where we learn how to evoke and challenge each other without being judgmental, directive or invasive.
- **Inner work must be invitational:** Circles of Trust are never “share or die” events, but times and places where people have the freedom within a purposeful process to learn and grow in their own way, on their own schedule and at their own level of need. From start to finish, this approach invites participation rather than insisting upon it because the inner teacher speaks by choice, not on command.
- **Our lives move in cycles like the seasons:** By using metaphors drawn from the seasons to frame our exploration of the inner life, we create a hospitable space that allows people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives to engage in a respectful dialogue. These metaphors represent cycles of life—such as the alternation of darkness and light, death and new life—shared by everyone in a secular, pluralistic society regardless of philosophical, religious or spiritual differences.
- **An appreciation of paradox enriches our lives and helps us hold greater complexity:** The journey we take in a Circle of Trust teaches us to approach the many polarities that come with being human as “both-and’s” rather than “either-ors,” holding them in ways that open us to new insights and possibilities. We listen to the inner teacher *and* to the voices in the circle, letting our own insights and the wisdom that can emerge in conversation check and balance each other. We trust both our intellects *and* the knowledge that comes through our bodies, intuitions and emotions.
- **We live with greater integrity when we see ourselves whole:** Integrity means integrating all that we are into our sense of self, embracing our shadows and limitations as well as our light and our gifts. As we deepen the congruence between our inner and outer lives we show up more fully in the key relationships and events of our lives, increasing our capacity to be authentic and courageous in life and work.
- **A “hidden wholeness” underlies our lives:** Whatever brokenness we experience in ourselves and in the world, a “hidden wholeness” can be found just beneath the surface. The capacity to stand and act with

integrity in the gap between what is and what could be or should be—resisting both the corrosive cynicism that comes from seeing only what is broken and the irrelevant idealism that comes from seeing only what is not—has been key to every life-giving movement and is among the fruits of the Circle of Trust approach.

PRACTICES OF THE CIRCLE OF TRUST APPROACH

In this culture, we know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, to argue its case, to make its point. We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions to show up, to express anger or joy. We know how to create spaces that invite the will to show up, to consolidate effort and energy around a common task. And we surely know how to create spaces that invite the ego to show up, preening itself and claiming its turf! But we seem to know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up, this core of ourselves, our selfhood.

—Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

- **Creating spaces that are open and hospitable, but resource-rich and charged with expectancy:** In a Circle of Trust, we are invited to slow down, listen and reflect in a quiet and focused space. At the same time, we engage in dialogue with others in the circle—a dialogue about things that matter. As this “sorting and sifting” goes on, and we are able to clarify and affirm our truth in the presence of others, that truth is more likely to overflow into our work and lives.
- **Committing to no fixing, advising, “saving” or correcting one another:** Everything we do is guided by this simple rule, one that honors the primacy and integrity of the inner teacher. When we are free from external judgment, we are more likely to have an honest conversation with ourselves and learn to check and correct ourselves from within.
- **Asking honest, open questions to “hear each other into speech”:** Instead of advising each other, we learn to listen deeply and ask questions that help others hear their own inner wisdom more clearly. As we learn to ask questions that are not advice in disguise, that have no other purpose than to help someone listen to the inner teacher, all of us learn and grow.
- **Exploring the intersection of the universal stories of human experience with the personal stories of our lives:** Guided conversations focused on a poem, a teaching story, a piece of music or a work of art—drawn from diverse cultures and wisdom traditions—invite us to reflect on the “big questions” of our lives, allowing each person to intersect and explore them in his or her own way.
- **Using multiple modes of reflection so everyone can find his or her place and pace:** In Circles of Trust, we speak and we listen. We explore important questions in large group conversation and dialogues in small groups. We make time for individual reflection and journaling. We respect nonverbal ways of learning, including music, movement and the arts. We honor the educative power of silence and the healing power of laughter. Together we weave a “tapestry of truth” with many and diverse threads, creating a pattern in which everyone can find a place that both affirms and stretches them.
- **Honoring confidentiality:** Participants in Circles of Trust understand that nothing said in these circles will be revealed outside the circle and that things said by participants will not be pursued when a session ends, unless the speaker requests it.

To learn more about the work of the Center for Courage & Renewal, visit www.CourageRenewal.org. For more about the principles and practices of the Circle of Trust approach in theory and in practice, please see Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).