

The Clearness Committee

A Communal Approach To Discernment

by Parker J. Palmer

Many of us face a dilemma when trying to deal with a personal problem, question, or decision. On the one hand, we know that the issue is ours alone to resolve and that we have the inner resources to resolve it, but access to our own resources is often blocked by layers of inner “stuff”—confusion, habitual thinking, fear, despair. On the other hand, we know that friends might help us uncover our inner resources and find our way, but by exposing our problem to others, we run the risk of being invaded and overwhelmed by their assumptions, judgments, and advice—a common and alienating experience. As a result, we often privatize these vital questions in our lives: at the very moment when we need all the help we can get, we find ourselves cut off from both our inner resources and the support of a community.

For people who have experienced this dilemma, I want to describe a method invented by the Quakers, a method that protects individual identity and integrity while drawing on the wisdom of other people. It is called a “Clearness Committee.” If that name sounds like it is from the sixties, it is—the 1660’s! From their beginnings over three hundred years ago, Quakers needed a way to draw on both inner and communal resources to deal with personal problems because they had no clerical leaders to “solve” their problems for them. The Clearness Committee is testimony to the fact that there are no external authorities on life’s deepest issues, not clergy or therapists or scholars; there is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard.

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: *each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems.* But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. If we do not believe in the reality of inner wisdom, the Clearness Committee can become an opportunity for manipulation. But if we respect the power of the inner teacher, the Clearness Committee can be a remarkable way to help someone name and claim his or her deepest truth.

The Clearness Committee’s work is guided by some simple but crucial rules and understandings. Among them, of course, is the rule that the process is confidential. When it is over, committee members will not speak with others about what was said and, equally important, will not speak with the focus person about the problem unless he or she requests a conversation.

Clearness Committee Guidelines (Revised)

1. As committee members, our responsibility is to create and protect a quiet, reflective, safe space for the focus person alone to occupy—a space where that person can have a deepening dialogue with their inner wisdom or inner teacher, not with us.
2. Committee members will do nothing that requires the focus person to interact with us—however subtly—disrupting their inner dialogue. This means behaving in ways that are countercultural and counterintuitive, ways that will feel difficult and uncomfortable at first, but will soon prove their worth:
 - a. If the focus person becomes teary, we will not extend a comforting hand, or offer a tissue. If the focus person says something funny, we may smile but we will not join in laughter.
 - b. We will attend with care to the “energetics” of how we participate in the circle—neither “leaning into it” nor “leaning out of it,” but sitting attentively at the circle’s edge in order to create and protect safe space.
 - c. We will suppress all forms of body language that convey nonverbally what we think or feel about what the focus person says. The focus person’s job is not to satisfy, persuade or prove anything to us, but to go more deeply into their own truth. Nonverbal responses can easily derail that process.
 - d. The focus person may choose not to make eye contact with us. But we will hold them steadily in our attention as a sign of respect—and in order to pick up important clues such as their emotional response to a question, and when they are finished speaking.
3. The Clearness Committee is not a grilling or a cross-examination. The pace should be slow and gentle, with pauses between answers and questions—learn to regard and respect silence as “another member” of the group. Remember that the focus person is always free *not* to answer a question.
4. The Clearness Committee is not a linear process in which the questioning moves stepwise toward a resolution. Instead, the process often “circles around” and “spirals down.”
5. When the focus person has answered a question you asked, you may feel the need for a follow-up question. But if you feel an urge to ask a third question before anyone else has spoken, please suppress it. Not only would a third question start to move *you* into the space, it would deprive the focus person of the richness that comes from having four or five other people asking questions from their vantage points.
6. Taking notes can be helpful, especially when we get to “mirroring.” So if taking verbatim notes on questions asked and answers given does not interfere with paying attention, please take notes. But if you find note-taking a distraction, please don’t do it. To maintain confidentiality, all notes will be handed to the focus person at the end of the Clearness Committee. As time goes by, your notes will serve as helpful reminders to the focus person.
7. If the focus person needs to use the restroom during the committee, they will excuse themselves while the rest of us wait in silence. If a member of the committee needs the restroom, they will simply leave and return in silence as the committee continues.
8. Each committee will have someone designated to manage the time. At the times noted on the schedule, this person will ask about “mirroring” and invite affirmations and celebrations. This person will also ask the focus person how they prefer to bring the process to a close; e.g., with a time of silence, by holding hands in a circle, with individual hugs, etc.
9. As soon as the Clearness Committee ends, the rule of “double confidentiality” begins. (a) Nothing said in the committee will ever be repeated. (b) Committee members may not approach the focus person later for further conversation about the process or the issue. If the focus person wishes to talk with one of us, they are free to ask, of course.