CHAPTER VIII

Living the Questions

Experiments with Truth

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE[I]

The Truth Beneath My Fear

If we want to create a space that welcomes the soul, we must speak our own truth to the center of the circle and listen receptively as others speak theirs. We must also respond to what others say in ways that extend the welcome, something that rarely happens in daily life.

Listen in on conventional conversations and see how often we respond to each other by agreeing, disagreeing, or simply changing the subject! We do not mean to be inhospitable to the soul, and yet we often are. By inserting our opinions and asserting our agendas, we advance our egos while the speaker's inner teacher retreats.

In a circle of trust, we learn an alternative way to respond, centered on the rare art of asking honest, open questions—questions that invite a speaker to reach for deeper and truer speech. If you do not believe that such questions are rare, just count how many you are asked over the next few days. Honest, open questions are countercultural, but they are vital to a circle of trust. Such questions, asked in a safe space, invite the inner teacher to say more about the matter at hand. And they give the speaker a chance to hear that voice free of the static we create by imposing our predilections on each other.

A few years ago, I became aware of my own need for another talk with the inner teacher. I had entered my early sixties and was feeling anxious about the future, for reasons I did not understand. So I invited a few friends to help me discern what my feelings meant.

The people I called on were experienced and wise, but I did not need their opinions or advice. I needed them to ask me hon-

est, open questions in the hope that I could touch the truth beneath my fear. Guided by the ground rules described in this chapter, they did just that for me. In three two-hour gatherings over a period of eighteen months, they created a space where I was able to discover the source of my anxiety.

Slowly, and with some reluctance, I began to see that what I feared was the impending collision of my age, vocation, and survival. I have worked independently since my late forties, earning my living partly by writing but largely by lecturing and leading workshops around the country. Now, in my early sixties—as I looked down the road at an endless procession of airports, hotel rooms, restaurant food, and auditoriums full of strangers—I worried about my diminishing stamina for this kind of work and about my diminishing income if I were to lay it down.

I was stuck on the horns of that dilemma until the third gathering of my group. I made some comment about aging and fear, and someone responded, "What do you fear most about growing old?" This was not the first time I had been asked that question; in fact, the question was one that I had often asked myself. But this time, my answer came from a place deeper than ego or intellect, in words I had never spoken or even thought: "I fear becoming a seventy-year-old man who does not know who he is when the books are out of print and the audiences are no longer applauding."

The moment I heard those words, I knew I had heard my soul speak—and I knew that I had to act on what I had heard. At stake was not merely my physical and financial comfort but my sense of identity and my spiritual well-being. So I began creating a retirement plan that I am now living into. It is a plan that gives me an opportunity to find out who else might be "in here" besides a writer and a speaker and to act on whatever I may learn while I still have energy and time.

Learning to Ask

I could not have made this decision, with all its attendant risks, without a small group of people whose honest, open questions created a space that invited my soul to speak and allowed me to hear it.

Such questioning may sound easy. But many people, including me, have trouble framing questions that are not advice in disguise. "Have you thought about seeing a therapist?" is *not* an honest, open question! A question like that serves my needs, not yours, pressing you toward my version of your problem and its solution instead of evoking your truth. Many of us need help learning how to ask questions that make the shy soul want to speak up, not shut up.

What are the marks of an honest, open question? An *honest* question is one I can ask without possibly being able to say to myself, "I know the right answer to this question, and I sure hope you give it to me"—which is, of course, what I am doing when I ask you about seeing a therapist. A dishonest question insults your soul, partly because of my arrogance in assuming that I know what you need and partly because of my fraudulence in trying to disguise my counsel as a query.

When I ask you an honest question—for example, "Have you ever had an experience that felt like your current dilemma?" or "Did you learn anything from that prior experience that feels useful to you now?"—there is no way for me to imagine what the "right answer" might be. Your soul feels welcome to speak its truth in response to questions like these because they harbor no hidden agendas.

An *open* question is one that expands rather than restricts your arena of exploration, one that does not push or even nudge you toward a particular way of framing a situation. "How do you feel about the experience you just described?" is an open question. "Why do you seem so sad?" is not.

We all know the difference between open and closed questions, and yet we often slip-slide toward the latter. For example, as I listen to you answer an open question about how you feel, I realize that you have not mentioned anger. Barely aware of what I am doing, I start thinking to myself, "If I were in your situation, I would certainly feel angry . . ."; then I think, "You must be bottling your anger up, and that's not good . . ."; and so I ask you, "Do you feel any anger?"

That question may seem open, since it allows you to answer any way you wish. But because it is driven by my desire to suggest how you *ought* to feel, it is likely to scare your soul away. The fact that I would be angry if I were in your shoes does not mean you have hidden anger; as hard as I may find it to believe, not everyone's inner life is the same as mine! And if you do have hidden anger, my effort to draw it out is likely to make you bury it deeper, as a protection against my presumptuousness. If you are angry, you will deal with it on your timetable, not mine—and step one will be to name your anger for yourself rather than accept my naming of it.

"Try not to get ahead of the language a speaker uses" is a good guideline for asking honest, open questions. By paying close attention to the words people speak, we can ask questions that invite them to probe what they may already know but have not yet fully named. If I ask you, "What did you mean when you said you felt 'frustrated'?" it might help you discover other feelings—if they are there and if you are ready to name them.

But even a question like that will shut you down if I ask it in the hope of getting you to "say the magic word," such as *anger,* that I am expecting to hear! The soul is a highly tuned bunk detector. It is quick to register, and flee from, all attempts at manipulation.

In my own struggle to learn to ask honest, open questions, I find it helpful to have a few guidelines. But the best way to make sure that my questions will welcome the soul is to ask them with

an honest, open spirit. And the best way to cultivate that spirit is to remind myself regularly that everyone has an inner teacher whose authority in his or her life far exceeds my own.

The finest school I know for watching the inner teacher at work and learning to ask honest, open questions is a discernment process called the "clearness committee" that has become standard practice in many circles of trust. That name makes it sound like something that came from the sixties, and so it did—the 1660s!

The clearness committee (so named because it helps us achieve clarity) was invented by the early Quakers. As a church that chose to do without benefit of ordained clergy, Quakers needed a structure to help members deal with problems that people in other denominations would simply take to their pastors or priests. That structure had to embody two key Quaker convictions: our guidance comes not from external authority but from the inner teacher, and we need community to help us clarify and amplify the inner teacher's voice.

The clearness committee that resulted is not just a place where we learn to ask honest, open questions. It is a focused microcosm of a larger circle of trust, a setting in which we have an intense experience of what it means to gather in support of someone's inner journey. When clearness committees become a regular part of an ongoing circle of trust, everything else that happens in the circle gains depth—which is why the rest of this chapter is devoted to explaining the clearness process.

Gaining Clarity

The process begins with a "focus person"—someone who is wrestling with an issue related to his or her personal life or work (or both)—inviting four to six people to serve on his or her committee.

"Four to six" is not a casual suggestion: a clearness committee works best with no fewer than four people and no more than six, in addition to the focus person. They should, of course, be people whom the focus person trusts, and when possible, they should represent a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints.[2]

Normally, the focus person writes a two- or three-page statement of the problem and gives it to committee members before they meet. If writing does not come easily to the focus person, he or she can tape-record some reflections to share with the committee in advance or make some notes to guide an oral presentation of the problem when the committee gathers.

As a first step toward "clearness," people usually find it helpful to frame the presentation of their problem in three parts:

- *Identifying the problem, as best one is able.* Sometimes the problem is clear ("I have a choice between two job offers"), and sometimes it is vague ("Something is off-center in my life, but I am not really sure what it is"). Since clarity is the aim of the process, the problem itself can be, and often is, murky. And even when the problem seems clear to the focus person, the process may reveal that the real problem is something else!
- *Offering background information that bears directly on the problem.* A modest amount of autobiographical information can help move a clearness committee along. If, for example, you are thinking about leaving your job and you have changed jobs five times in the past decade, you would do well to offer this fact up front.
- *Naming whatever clues there may be on the horizon about where you are headed with the problem.* Here the focus person shares any hunches he or she may have about the issue at hand—whether it is an inclination toward one of those two job offers or simply an anxious feeling about the foggy vista up ahead.

Before the clearness committee begins, members spend some time with the focus person reviewing the rules that govern the process, which will be explained as this chapter proceeds. It is important that everyone understand the rules—as well as the principles behind them—and take seriously the obligation that comes with promising to hold safe space for someone's soul.

Members of the committee should have a printed schedule, modeled on the one presented here, to help them keep the time as well as the rules. Even when the process feels sluggish or the focus person's problem seems to have been resolved, staying with the schedule often yields unexpected insights. So the total time of two hours is nonnegotiable, as is the amount of time allotted for each portion of the process:

7:00 P.M.	Sit down in silence in a circle of chairs. The silence will be broken by the focus person when he or she is ready to begin.
7:00–7:15	The focus person describes his or her issue while committee members listen, without interruption.
7:15–8:45	Questions only! For an hour and a half, members of the committee may not speak to the focus person in any way except to ask brief, honest, open questions.
8:45–8:55	Does the focus person want members to "mirror back" what they have heard—in addition to asking more questions—or to continue with questions only? If mirroring is invited, members are to reflect the focus person's words or body language, without interpretation.
8:55–9:00	Affirmations and celebrations of the focus person, each other, and the shared experience.
9:00 P.M.	End—remembering to honor the rule of "double confidentiality."

The clearness committee begins with several minutes of silence, which is broken by the focus person when he or she is ready to present the problem. Even when the problem has been shared with committee members in advance, this oral review often reveals nuances that can be conveyed only face to face. The presentation should take no more than fifteen minutes, and during that time, members may not speak, even to ask for clarification.

When the focus person is finished presenting the problem, he or she lets the group members know that their work can begin. For the next ninety minutes, committee members are guided by a simple but demanding rule: *the only way they may speak to the focus person is to ask brief, honest, open questions.*

The questions should be short and to the point, confined to a single sentence, if possible. When I ask a question by saying, "You mentioned such-and-such, which made me think of such-and-such, and so I'd like to ask you such-and-such . . . ," I am often trying to nudge the focus person toward my way of looking at things. A brief question, with no preamble or explanation, reduces the risk that I will start to offer covert advice.

The questions should be gently paced, with periods of silence between a question, a response, and the next question. The clearness committee is not a grilling or a cross-examination; a relaxed and graceful pace helps the shy soul feel safe. If I ask the focus person one question and, after he or she has answered, follow up with another, it is probably all right. But if I am tempted to ask a third question before anyone else has had a chance, I need to take a deep breath and remember that there are other people in the room.

I should not ask questions simply to satisfy my curiosity. Instead, my questions should come from a desire to support the focus person's inner journey with as much purity as I can muster. As a member of the committee, I am not here to get my own

needs met. I am here to be fully present to the focus person, hoping to help that person be fully present to his or her soul.

It is usually most helpful to ask questions that are more about the person than about the problem, since a clearness committee is less about problem solving than about drawing close to true self. I remember a committee called by a CEO who was dealing with a complex and painful racial issue in her corporation. She found it helpful when one member asked, "What have you learned about yourself in previous conflicts that might be useful to you now?" But she found it unhelpful when another asked, "Do you have a good corporate lawyer?"

If the focus person feels that a question is not honest and open, he or she has the right to say so, to call a questioner back to the rules and the spirit behind them. But if my question is found wanting, I do *not* have the right to explain or defend myself: "You see, that question came to me when you said such-and-such, then I thought such-and-such, and what I really meant was such-and-such."

Such an "explanation" is just one more way of trying to nudge the focus person toward my way of thinking. If I am challenged by the focus person, I have only one option: to sit back, absorb the critique, and eventually return to the process in a more helpful way. Offering any sort of explanation or defense puts my needs and interests ahead of the focus person's and will scare off his or her soul.

Normally, as questions are asked, the focus person answers them aloud, which helps the person hear whatever the inner teacher is saying. But the focus person has the right to pass on any question, without explanation, and committee members should avoid asking questions of a similar sort. Taking a pass does not mean that the focus person is stifling the inner teacher: he or she may learn something important from the fact that a certain question cannot be answered in front of other people.

No One to Fool but Myself

The discipline of asking honest, open questions is the heart of the clearness committee. But there are other disciplines that guide the committee's work, all of them aimed at supporting the focus person on his or her inner journey.

If the focus person cries, committee members are not free to offer "comfort" by giving the person a tissue, laying a hand on his or her shoulder, or speaking words of consolation. Acts such as these may be compassionate under normal circumstances, but they are disruptive in a clearness committee.

If I try to comfort the focus person, I take his or her attention away from whatever message may be in those tears. Now the focus person is attending to *me*—not the inner teacher—trying to make me feel like a good caregiver: "Thank you for your concern. But please, don't worry about me. I'll be OK. . . ." By engaging the focus person in an interpersonal exchange, I have derailed his or her inner journey. I must remember that for these two hours, I have only one responsibility: to help the focus person devote undivided attention to the voice of true self.

By the same token, if the focus person cracks a good joke, I am not free to laugh long and loud, though a soft smile will do no harm. Once again, behavior that we normally regard as supportive is disruptive and distracting in this setting. By joining the focus person in laughter, I not only call attention to myself—"See, I have a sense of humor too!"—but I may also prevent the focus person from asking a critical inner question: "Am I using my sense of humor to cover up the pain I felt when that question was asked?"

One of the most demanding disciplines of a clearness committee involves eye contact. In our culture, it is generally regarded as impolite *not* to look each other in the eye when we talk. But observe what happens the next time you are in a conversation involving several people. As one person speaks, the listeners send

silent signals—smiling and nodding, cocking their heads, furrowing their brows. They give the speaker a steady stream of clues about whether they understand or appreciate whatever he or she is saying.

These clues are meant to be helpful, and so they can be, *if* the speaker's goal is to persuade or connect with other people. But nonverbal clues usually nudge the speaker down a path chosen partly by the listeners, rather than one dictated exclusively by the speaker's inner teacher. As we pick up these signals from others, we often alter what we are saying in the hope of achieving our rhetorical goal.

In a clearness committee, the focus person's goal is to communicate with true self, not with other people. Here nonverbal signals are not just irrelevant; they can easily lead the person down a false path. What committee members think or feel about what a focus person says is of no consequence. The only responses that count are those that come from within the focus person.

So members of a clearness committee try to refrain from nonverbal responses and to listen to the focus person with as much receptive neutrality as they can muster. But most of us find it very hard to achieve this state. So the focus person is encouraged to break eye contact when answering a question or even for the full two hours—to speak with eyes closed or cast down to the floor—in order to avoid seeing the nonverbal signals that committee members may be sending.

At first, the focus person may find it as hard to break eye contact as the committee members find it to withhold nonverbal responses. But after a while, these practices become liberating for everyone. They encourage truthful speaking and receptive listening, drawing us deep into a space that honors and welcomes the soul.

For thirty years, I have used clearness committees to help me make important decisions. As I have listened to people's honest, open questions—and to my inner teacher's response—I have

always had the same thought: in this space, I don't need to convince anyone of anything, so there's no one left to fool except myself. In this moment, nothing makes sense except to speak my own truth as clearly as I know how. That simple realization has allowed me to hear, and follow, some inner imperatives that have changed the course of my life.

Cause for Celebration

After an hour and a half of questions and responses, the clearness committee enters its final phase. With fifteen minutes remaining, someone asks the focus person if he or she would like members to "mirror back" what they have heard, in addition to asking more questions, or would prefer to continue with the "questions only" rule.

As a focus person, I have always chosen mirroring, because new insights often come to me in that final phase of the process. But because mirroring releases members from the "questions only" rule, it puts us on the edge of a slippery slope where we might start trying to fix, save, advise, or set the focus person straight. So mirroring is protected by clear definitions of what is and is not allowed: it can take three, and only three, forms.

The first involves saying to the focus person, "When you were asked such-and-such a question, you gave such-and-such an answer . . ."—with both the question and the answer being direct quotes, not paraphrases, of what was said. Obviously, if I hold up such a mirror, I think there is something in that question and answer that the focus person needs to see. But I am not allowed to say what that something is, lest I start offering advice. The focus person is free to speak, or not, about the reflection I offer: what matters is not what I see in the focus person's words but what the focus person sees in them as I mirror them back.

The second form of mirroring involves quoting two or three answers the focus person gave to two or three different questions, inviting the person to look at them in relation to one another. By "connecting the dots" in a way that suggests a pattern among the answers, I am coming dangerously close to analyzing the problem and perhaps even proposing a "solution." But again, I am not allowed to describe or even hint at the pattern I think I see. And again, the focus person is free to respond in any way he or she wishes, including saying nothing at all.

The third form of mirroring involves the focus person's body language. I might say to the focus person, "When you were asked about the job offer from the insurance company, you slumped in your chair and spoke in a soft monotone. When you were asked about the offer from the National Park Service, you sat up straight and spoke louder and with inflection."

It is critical that I *describe* rather than *interpret* body language. "You slumped in your chair and spoke in a soft monotone" is a description. "You seemed unenthusiastic, even depressed, as you spoke" is an interpretation. The former allows the focus person to look into the mirror and come to his or her own conclusions about what is there; the latter is a judgment that may create resistance, not receptivity. And my judgment may well be wrong. A posture that says "depressed" to me may reflect deep thoughtfulness in the speaker.

Body language is usually inaudible to the person who "speaks" it. So despite the ever-present slippery slope, mirroring it back in a purely reflective manner can be a great gift to someone who is trying to listen to the inner teacher.

With five minutes remaining in this two-hour process, a committee member needs to say, "It's time for affirmations and celebrations." I have served on many clearness committees, and I have never known these final five minutes to be a false or

forced exercise. As the process comes to an end, I almost always realize that I have just seen with my own eyes something amazing and precious: the reality and power of the human soul. I have watched a human being gain important and often unexpected insights from his or her inner teacher. In our kind of world, where the soul is so often shouted down, a chance to welcome it, honor it, and watch it do its work is clearly cause for celebration.

The soul work that goes on in a clearness committee is quiet, subtle, and nearly impossible to put into words. But let the following words from one participant testify to the way the process can give tangible form to the most intangible of emotions:

> The question I have asked myself on so many different levels over the years is "How do I love _____?" The blank space could be filled in with a variety of words—my wife, my children, my parents, my students, my fellow human beings. . . . This has proven to be the most challenging question.
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> Recently, through my work [in a circle of trust], I gained new insight into this matter. As part of [our time together], we explored and took part in a clearness committee. In this process, I learned a new and most demanding way to listen, a way unencumbered by my own antipathies and judgments. I learned to listen openly for the soul of another, for that which is genuine and sacred.
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> In a moment of realization, I saw that this was the way I could put love into practice—by listening selflessly with complete attention to another. I could do this at any time with anyone I met. I could simply practice love through listening. Suddenly the most evasive, idealistic notion came softly down to earth.[3]

A Bird in the Hand

We are all shaped by conventional culture. So we all come into a clearness committee carrying a gravitational force that tries to pull our relationships back to fixing, saving, advising, and setting each other straight.

To help people resist this pull, members of a clearness committee are asked to follow behavioral rules so specific that they can seem ludicrous. Do not hand the focus person a tissue if he or she cries; do not laugh aloud if he or she cracks a joke; maintain a neutral expression when speaking and listening; allow the focus person to refrain from making eye contact for two full hours.

When I teach these ground rules, people often say that they feel intimidated by this level of "micromanagement." My response, I confess, is "Good!" When we agree to hold someone's soul in trust, we need to feel the weight of that commitment in order to do the job well. And people who teach others this process need to raise the behavioral bar so high that it will be too embarrassing for anyone to break the rules casually, minimizing the chance that a focus person will be harmed.

But as we raise the bar, we run the risk of turning the clearness committee into a process driven more by law than by the spirit of the law. If we are to make this space safe for the soul, a spirit of hospitality is at least as important as rules that help us act hospitably.

So in addition to teaching the rules, I offer people two clear and simple images that suggest the spirit behind the rules. I offer the first image *before* I teach the rules that have been laid out in this chapter: as members of a clearness committee, we are to create and protect a space to be occupied *only* by the focus person. For two hours, we are to act as if we had no reason for existing except to hold the focus person in a safe space, giving him or her our

undivided attention, and guarding the borders of that space against anything that might distract that person.

The rules that guide our behavior are designed to keep us from invading that space, from saying or doing anything that would draw attention toward ourselves. That is why we cannot explain ourselves when the focus person objects to a question or offer comfort when the focus person cries or interpret the focus person's nonverbal speech. Behaviors like these put our needs and agendas into the space, displacing the focus person's soul.

The image of "creating and protecting a space" where we can attend exclusively to the focus person answers almost every question about the conduct of a clearness committee. Should I take notes as the focus person speaks? If note-taking distracts me from attending to the focus person, the answer is no; if note-taking helps me pay attention, the answer is yes. What if the focus person or a member of the committee needs to use the bathroom? The focus person will leave with a brief explanation, and members will maintain silence until he or she returns; a committee member will leave quietly, without explanation, while the process continues and will return to the circle as quietly as he or she left.

There is one more rule that helps us hold safe space for the focus person—the rule of "double confidentiality." Once the committee ends, nothing said in it will ever be repeated to anyone. People who took notes during the meeting must give them to the focus person before they leave. This not only guarantees confidentiality, but it also leaves the focus person with a great gift: a detailed record of what his or her soul was saying when it felt safe enough to tell the truth.

The second part of double confidentiality is as important as the first: committee members are forbidden from approaching the focus person a day, a week, or a year later, saying, "Remember when you said such-and-such? Well, I have a thought to share with

you about that." The focus person may seek one of us out for further exploration. But if we were to pursue that person with our feedback or advice, we would violate his or her solitude. Focus persons often say that of all the clearness committee rules, double confidentiality is the one that gives them the most confidence that in this space they can speak their truth freely.

After I have taught the rules, and just before the committee process begins, I offer a second image, an image many have found helpful. For the next two hours, I suggest, we are to hold the soul of the focus person as if we were holding a small bird in the palms of our two hands.

As we do so, we are likely to experience three temptations, and it is important that we resist all of them:

- After a while, our hands may start to close around the bird, wanting to take this creature apart and find out what makes it tick. Resist this temptation: our job is not to analyze but simply to hold in open trust.
- As the time goes by, our arms may begin to tire, and we may find ourselves tempted to lay the bird down: attention flags, the mind wanders, and we are no longer holding the focus person at the center of our awareness. We must resist this temptation too. A bird is light, and a soul is even lighter. If we understand that we are under no obligation to fix, save, advise, or set this person straight, our burden will disappear, and we can hold this soul for two hours without tiring.
- Toward the end of the process—having held the bird openly with the best of intentions—we may find our cupped hands making a subtle but persistent upward motion, encouraging the bird to fly: "Don't you see what you have learned here? Aren't you ready to take off, to act on what you now know?" Resist this temptation too. This bird will fly when it is ready, and we cannot possibly know when that will be.

The success of a clearness committee does not depend on whether the focus person "solves" his or her problem and is ready to act. Life, as everyone knows, does not unfold so neatly. The success of a clearness committee depends simply on whether we have held the focus person safely, for two full hours, in our open hands. When we do, the focus person almost always receives new insights from the inner teacher—and often a revelation or two.

When the clearness committee is finished, we do not need to stop holding the focus person. As the group disbands, the image that often comes to me is that of drawing my open hands into my open heart, where I can continue to hold the focus person in my thoughts, my caring, my prayers.

I have taught this way of "being alone together" to thousands of people over the past thirty years. When the process ends, I always ask, "When was the last time a small group of caring, competent adults held you at the center of their attention for two full hours with nothing on their minds except creating and protecting a space where you could hear your soul speak?" With rare exceptions, I have heard only one answer: "Never in my life have I experienced anything like this."

There are many good ways to be together—life would be quite dreadful if all our interactions were governed by clearness committee rules! Still, it seems a great shame that we spend so much time within easy reach of each other and rarely, if ever, extend this kind of support for each other's inner journey.

But it is never too late. Virginia Shorey was a gifted high school teacher—and an extraordinary human being—who sought and received such support in the final months of her life. A participant in a two-year circle of trust, she learned after the group began that she had incurable cancer; she died before the group ended.

The people in Virginia's circle were companions on her journey, and beneficiaries of her great courage, in part through four

clearness committees that Virginia requested and wrote about in her journal:[4]

> Everyone [in these clearness committees] asked me very honest and compassionate questions. I opened myself up to them, my fears, and all the emotions I could not describe. I bared my intentions, my unfinished goals, dreams, and the fear of my life ending so soon, and also my fears for my family. I told them about how I am not through learning and giving yet. I wanted to write a book but now my world was crumbling. My committee did not comfort me. Neither did they fix me. I felt very safe around them. I found strength in their presence. After these [sessions], I began to understand my illness, and even accepted it as a gift. These clearness committees were my allies in getting out of my own jungle.

Shortly before Virginia died, she wrote me to express her gratitude not only for her clearness committees but for her entire circle of trust. I cannot imagine better words with which to close this chapter:

> The reason I'm writing to you is the deep appreciation that I feel in my heart for [this circle]. It has blessed my life so much and has given me all sorts of insights, not only in my teaching but also in my personal and family life.
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> For one thing, it has given me true courage to respect and honor myself and thus paved new ways to really know myself. It helped me understand the paradoxes of life, especially when I was diagnosed with terminal cancer. It made me aware of my resources. . . .
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> I've learned to see beyond my senses, to see the spiritual world through silence and meditation, through different eyes. I've learned to appreciate nature like never before, the cycles, the seasons. I've come to the point of seeing that oth-

ers are worthy of my respect, and that I am also worthy of theirs.

Most of all, I learned that we are all a part of a larger community, and hence have tremendously altered my belief system. Because of [this circle], I've learned to conquer my fears and come to know that my resources are limitless. Indeed, I've come to fully understand the courage to live and die and how magnificent it is to know true self!