

Circles of Trust DVD Transcripts

Chapter 1: The Primacy of Soul

PARKER PALMER:

Whenever I speak with people about soul, I always try to acknowledge the fact that this is one of those words that has to be held very lightly because it points towards a mystery. It's a mystery for which nobody has the true name or the real story. Every tradition has I think, a different name for it. The Hasidic Jews call it the spark of the divine in every human being. Buddhists I think, call it big self sometimes, or Self with a capital S. Thomas Merton called it true self. Quakers, I'm a Quaker and we tend to call it the inner light, or the inner teacher. I think all of these are synonyms for the same thing and what that thing is, no one really knows. The best I can do is say it's the 'being' in 'human being.' What a person calls it doesn't matter to me, but that we call it something matters a lot.

Since the soul itself is a mystery that nobody has a name for, I think the closest you can come is with an image or metaphor. The metaphor that I landed on some time ago, I just found enormously helpful which is this, that the soul as I experience it is very much like a wild animal. On the one hand a wild animal has the capacity to survive in the deep, dark woods in very difficult places, places where there's hardly anything to eat. A wild animal has strength and has resilience and a kind of wiliness, and a kind of knowing about survival that the human soul has, on which we depend. I think everybody whose ever been in a really tough situation would say, something inside me allowed me to keep going, something inside me kept carrying me forward.

The soul has this strength but at the same time, just like a wild animal, the soul is also very shy. We know that if we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is run crashing into the woods yelling and screaming for it to come out. What we need to do is to walk into the woods quietly, sit at the base of a tree, breath with the earth for a while and eventually the thing we seek may put in an appearance. If it does we may only catch it out of the corner of our eye, but to see something so original, so wild, so natural, so elemental, I think for most of us is never to forget it.

Chapter 2: The Great Divide

PARKER PALMER:

I'm interested in the divided life and the movement toward becoming divided no more, which isn't something that one becomes in an instant for all time. It's a decision that I think we make and remake throughout our lives.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

We are born with the seed of true self that contains the spiritual DNA of our uniqueness, an encoded birthright knowledge of who we are, why we are here, and how we are related to others. As we travel the tricky terrain between infancy and young adulthood, still close enough to our origins to be in touch with our inner truth, but aware of the mounting pressure to play a more guarded role out there in the world, our true self starts to feel threatened.

PARKER PALMER:

The idea of a divided life comes first from my own experience. I'm just aware of how often in my life I have felt it necessary to build a wall of separation between what was going on inside of me and what I was expressing outside of me. We live in a world where it feels threatening to let our own identity and integrity reveal itself. We build this wall partly for interior reasons. Then I think as we grow older, we work our way through a series of institutions, especially schools and the workplace, where we're actively taught to keep that wall high and wide and thick.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

As the outer world makes more demands on us, we stop doing the things children do to stay close to their souls, things like daydreaming and playacting. The closer we get to adulthood, the more we stifle the imagination that these things require. Why? Imagining other possibilities for our lives would remind us of the painful gap between who we truly are and the role we play in the so-called real world. As Thomas Merton once said, "Most of us live lives of self-impersonation."

PARKER PALMER:

The problem with this, obviously, is that the self, the true self, not the little ego self, the little selfish self, but the true self, the self as we were meant to be, wants to make itself known in the world. Ultimately, it's the only gift we have to give.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

The soul wants us to be grounded and true, to keep us connected to the community in which we find life. It wants us to tell the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two. It wants to give us life, and it wants us to pass that gift along to others.

PARKER PALMER:

I really believe that the gift we have to give to each other and the world is not first and foremost in the skills that we went to school to learn or the trained capacities that we've developed. Those are valuable, sure enough. The selfhood that we can offer each other, the gift of identity and integrity, the gift of presence to live a life in which you're not offering that gift, I think is somehow, we know intuitively that that kind of life falls short of why we're here, who we were meant to be, how we were meant to be.

Chapter 3: Journey Toward an Undivided Life

PARKER PALMER:

I want to use this very simple piece of paper to just say a few things about how I understand a movement that we go through in life that has to do with the relation of our outer lives to our inner lives. Our onstage lives on the front of this strip, and our backstage lives. Onstage I think we're worried about things like influence, image, impact. Am I making a difference in the world? How do I look while I'm doing it? Do they like me? All of those kind of ego questions that come when we're engaged with the outside world.

Backstage I think the language, or the concerns, are very different. It has back here to do with intuition, with instinct, with value and belief with faith. Ultimately I think with those deeper sources in us from which all this comes which finally I call Soul, the Being, and Human Being for which there are many names and no one knows the true name.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

We are born into wholeness and integrity, with no separation between our inner and outer lives. As time goes on and we become more concerned with surviving and succeeding in the external world, we slowly lose touch with our souls and disappear into our roles.

PARKER PALMER:

There's a stage two, which happens for some kids at home, happens for most of us at school, where we start realizing that it's not safe to be our backstage truth in the onstage world. That if we were to reveal too much of who we really are and how we're really feeling, the world would become a dangerous place for us. We start building this wall of separation.

I think what happens is that that life becomes painful. This disconnect between the inner and the outer becomes very painful and so at some point for many of us there's a desire to bring our lives into this classic shape of the circle which means that I want what's important to me inwardly to become the principles around which my external life revolves so that there's something like unity in my life. In a lot of spiritual writing we find the word that describes this shape, which is the word centering. I want to become centered so that my values, my beliefs, my convictions become the sort of plum line around which my external life revolves.

That's a great step forward and yet when you turn the image this way you realize that what you're looking at, it looks kind of like getting the wagons in a circle or a gated community, a walled garden, where the tenancy is to say the only people who can come in here are the people who agree with me. I will exclude everybody who doesn't share my core beliefs and principles. I don't think it's unfair to say that we see a lot in the world where people's spirituality is used in exactly this way so that this becomes, despite its elegance and grace as a shape, just another kind of wall. It's a prettier wall, but it's still a wall in many cases.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

Yet, that's not our only alternative.

PARKER PALMER:

We can separate the ends of that circle, flip them this way, reconnect them, and create this very interesting shape called the Mobius Strip, which has the feature of being continuous and unbroken so that you can put your finger on the outside surface, or what appears to be the outside surface. Keep tracing it around and pretty soon seamlessly find yourself on what appears to be the inside surface. Keep tracing that around and pretty soon come out on appears to be the outside surface again. You have to keep saying what appears to be because the message of the Mobius Strip is there is no inner and outer. The two co-create each other and when I saw that I thought, "Yeah, that's exactly what happens in life." Whatever is inside of me and of you emerges into the world, interacts with what's outside of us which we take in and internalize, and in that interaction, in that exchange, we co-create what we call reality.

It seems to me that ultimately there's just one question, for me at least, that one has to ask about this model of adult wholeness and that is, as I travel this Mobius Strip between my backstage life and my onstage life, constantly co-creating, how can I become so aware of that exchange, that co-creative transaction moment by moment, that I can increasingly make choices about it that are life-giving, rather than death-dealing. To me that's a very important question that links the inner life with the outer life. I think the Mobius Strip is the adult form of the wholeness into which we were born.

Chapter 4: Circles of Trust

WOMAN NARRATOR:

On our journey toward wholeness, we experience a paradox. We need solitude to hear and honor the inner teacher, and yet we need community as well. We need the comfort and the challenge of other people who can help us discern our inner truth and support us in the demands of embracing it. We need wise and dependable support if we are to take an honest and sustained journey toward an undivided life.

PARKER PALMER:

Once you've said that the soul has primacy or some kind of very fundamental and important role to play in human life, not only in individual life but in collective life, then you have to ask the question, "How do we get access to that? How do we invite that to come into view?"

One of the challenges, I think, before me for many years was to try to understand what it might look like to educate the soul in the original meaning of that word "educate," to invite out from within, to create a space in which the soul can put in an appearance and speak its voice and make its claim on our lives.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

A Circle of Trust has no agenda other than to support the inner journey of each person in the group, to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth, to help each person listen to his or her inner teacher. Unfortunately in our culture, community too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the shy soul away.

PARKER PALMER:

When I was writing the book *A Hidden Wholeness*, and I was searching for a name that would describe this form of community that we invite people into of being alone together, of making a space that honors the inner truth of every individual in the community, the phrase "circle of trust" came very quickly to mind. A trust, at this level, is very counter-cultural in our world, but what I think we do by calling it a Circle of Trust is precisely what Lincoln had in mind when he said we must invite "the better angels of our nature" onto the playing field, into the public arena. I think, like everything we do, this is invitational. It invites that trusting and trustworthy part of ourselves to show up.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

Community is vital in helping us develop a sense of true self, where only in community can the self exercise and fulfill its nature: giving and taking, listening and speaking, being and doing. Yet true self will show up only in communities that make it feel safe. As we invite people into these circles, we must be able to make reliable promises about the protections they will find once they get there.

PARKER PALMER:

One of the promissory notes is we will establish the conditions here that will be hospitable to your soul, that will be welcoming to your soul, that your soul will find trustworthy. We've operationalized that notion with all kinds of carefully thought out ground rules and all kinds of carefully thought out practices so that what happens almost all the time is that this invitation to be a Circle of Trust becomes, in fact, a real Circle of Trust.

Chapter 5: Establishing Conditions for a Circle of Trust

PARKER PALMER:

It seems to me that in our kind of world we need to think carefully about the conditions that make Circles of Trust accessible, available, possible for real people who lead real lives, and five of those conditions have occurred to me over the years. By that I mean a whole bunch of things but especially clear limits on the time commitment involved. We try to be very clear with people about how much time they're asked to give to this and then we try to keep time very carefully. I think one of the things that makes the soul feel safe is leadership that comes through on its promises and one of the promises we make is how we're going to use that time.

There's another piece of clarity that has to do with the intentionality of this group, why it is we're together and where it is we're trying to go together which constantly reverts back to that Touchstone of honoring the soul, of making safe space for you to listen to your inner teacher, being alone together in a community of people where you can both hear yourself, and do some sorting and sifting of that inner truth in the presence of others gaining also their encouragement, and clarity too about the ground rules that make all of that possible so that there's intentionality not only about where we're going but about how we're going to get there.

There's very specific guidance that people don't find confining but liberating that helps shape our relationships and that end up making these groups for most people I've talked to not a heavy add on to an already busy schedule but the kind of time and space that actually liberates other parts of their lives. It actually lifts something off their shoulders and gives them a more spacious sense of time, and work, and relationships, and all of those things that we may get jammed up with otherwise.

This is a little tricky one to talk about because a Circle of Trust can consist of two or three people who know how to hold safe space for the soul and I'm not suggesting that they need a facilitator but they do need a lot of sensibility, and a high degree of awareness, and a disciplined practice about how to keep the space safe for each other. As a circle grows larger, and typically our circles might have 25 people in them, a skilled leader is very important because everything that we're doing is counter-cultural. This basic norm we have, no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting straight. That goes right upstream against everything in our culture and a facilitator needs to hold a space in which that norm is lifted up, and insisted upon. It's really one of our non-negotiables because when we break that rule the soul tends to go back into hiding.

Because it's critical we're very careful about who it is that we accept into facilitator preparation. We take at least a year to prepare those people and often more than a year because they have a mentoring relationship that gives them another year of sort of practice, in many cases, before they strike out on their own. I think if a community is going to hold its own against the current of the mainstream culture, leadership is a very important component. It's a kind of leadership that not only demands that I be granted authority by the group but that also requires me to authorize each and every person in that group to come from the inside out. To live out his or her beliefs, values, commitments in words and actions. It's a mutual gift of rejoining the soul and role, of bringing who you are to what you do.

Chapter 6: Characteristics of a Circle of Trust

PARKER PALMER:

I think the third condition for a circle of trust is that it be invitational, openly invitational. By that I mean, no one is compelled to go there, that this is not something that an employer can assign employees to do, or a school district can send people to as a remedial course. This is something that has to be chosen because that's the only way the soul is willing to operate. The soul is the freest part of us and it operates under its own steam power. It doesn't take orders well. Not only do people have to come into a circle freely, but once they get there, everything that we do with them has to be offered up as invitation, as freedom of choice.

When we give in to a circle, for example, and we want on that first evening to give everyone a chance to introduce herself or himself, we do not say, I don't say as facilitator, "Let's start on my left with George and then go around the circle with self-introductions," because as soon as I do that, I've introduced an element of coercion. That George has to go first and whoever is next to George has to go next. That's not free, that's not freedom, that's not invitational. We say, "Whoever wants to introduce themselves first, please feel free to do so. Whoever wants to go next, feel free to do so, and we'll just sit here until everyone who wants the chance to introduce themselves has done so." We take this invitational principle very seriously in everything we do, even self-introductions. No forced marches around the circle.

We say to people, if I as facilitator invite a small group opportunity, you're free to join that or not, depending on what you feel you need. Maybe what you need at that point is some silent time, some journaling, a walk in the woods, a nap. Who knows? Your soul knows better than we do what you need. We really mean that you have an inner authority that exceeds ours. What we find happening under those invitational circumstances is I think, a couple of things. One is that people really do have a chance to hear what's arising inside of them and to take it seriously in a way that goes far beyond anything we could put into their minds or hearts. Secondly, because they are free, they invest themselves at an extraordinary level of intensity. Hardly ever does someone take that freedom to leave the room. They take it to embrace this opportunity with a new depth and vigor.

We'll work for maybe an hour, dialogue style with a poem. We'll then give people a half hour of silent break to do some journaling. We'll then go into small groups for people, triads, where people can talk more intimately with one another and get more air time than you can in a large group, and then back to the large circle for a very simple process of sharing insights, which we don't discuss, we just receive into the center of the circle. When you think about that kind of rhythmic pedagogy, you start realizing, well everybody has some way of participating in this and people who are not comfortable in the large circle can be comfortable in solitude or the small group.

I think when you put all this together, these elements of graceful ambiance, this slowing down, this doing more with less, this paying attention to rhythm—what you have is the group process equivalent of walking into the woods, sitting quietly at the base of the tree, breathing with the earth and waiting for the soul to put in an appearance and it does.

Chapter 7: Common Ground & Third Things

PARKER PALMER:

The question becomes: how, in an officially secular and highly pluralistic society, do you give people common ground, a sort of level playing field as it were to explore inner life issues without seeming to come at them from the standpoint of a particular tradition, let alone a creed or belief system?

The whole purpose and objective of the Circle of Trust is to make safe space for the soul. One of the ways we do that is by using what we've come to call "third things" as the focus of the tension at certain moments in the Circle of Trust. By third thing, what I mean is that we now have a presence in the room which is other than facilitator or one of the participants. It could be a poem, it could be a teaching story from one of the wisdom traditions, it could be a case study from the profession that we're working with. It might be a piece of music or a piece of art, but the point is to invite the group to interact with this third thing as they would with a living being, to get in dialogue with it, to get inside it and to let it get inside of them and to let it evoke from them whatever it is that the soul wants to say.

These third things have the wonderful quality that was named by Emily Dickinson in one of her poems when she admonished us to "tell the truth and tell it slant." You can talk about the poem and its journey, its depiction of journey, towards self-hood and say a lot of things about yourself without attaching your own name to it. That happens until people start to realize this really is a Circle of Trust. This really is a safe place, and now I can attach my name to some of what I'm saying mediated by the gracious, hospitable power of these third things which become, for us, like another person in the room, a welcoming, inviting, evocative person with whom we're in dialogue and with whom we're learning.

When we work with third things, and we invite people in the group to respond to the poem, the story, the case study, the piece of music, whatever it may be, we don't do the typical academic thing of debating about it, about what it really means. The invitation is rather for each person to speak from his or her center to the center of the circle and to let those affirmations, those vexations, the blessings, whatever they may be, lie there in juxtaposition with one another at first.

Eventually what happens is that these comments start weaving themselves together in what I've come to call a "tapestry of truth," which is a very complex thing that emerges over the life of a group. You can see people studying that tapestry and saying, "Oh, that thread that I put in yesterday is now one that I can withdraw, because a thread that someone else put in has clarified that issue for me."

People are learning powerfully in a way that's, again, very counter-cultural. They're not learning through other people's attempts to persuade them to think differently or to argue them into some other position. They're learning in community, because this tapestry keeps getting woven and rewoven. They're learning from within. The sense of community is palpable and the sense of people being in touch with their own inner truth is palpable as well.

Chapter 8: Clearness Committee

PARKER PALMER:

We have all kinds of sacred questions inside of us. What's the meaning of our lives? What's the purpose of our lives? What about death? All these deep questions of meaning and so it seems to me that every wisdom tradition that I know anything about, east and west, is in the first instance a way of knowing that invites us into understanding the unity of all things and learning about how to integrate ourselves more deeply into the unity that we are and the unity that's all around us, the oneness. Every wisdom tradition gives us practices that help that happen, that help us claim wholeness.

The Clearness Committee is a practice invented in the middle of the seventeenth century by the early Quakers who believed deeply, as I believe, that every person has an inner teacher, a source of inner truth, which for me is the same as soul or self-hood or identity and integrity. The question was how to help people get in touch with that, how to open a person's life to hear that inner truth more deeply because we all know how difficult that is in the noise of the world and in the rush of our lives and with our own egos constantly at work.

A small group of people, five or six people, gather for two hours with a person who's got a question that he or she is wrestling with: an issue, a problem, a decision they're trying to make, a discernment they're trying to make. For two full hours those five or six caring, competent adults operate with a very simple rule. They cannot speak to that so-called focus person, the person with the issue, in any other way except to ask an honest, open question. It sounds simple but if you imagine not only the length of time involved, two hours, but what's involved in asking honest, open questions which turns out to be very challenging and very demanding. Have you thought about seeing a therapist is not an honest, open question. It represents the kind of question we like to ask, which has built-in advice. We ask a question as if we had a question when in fact we're trying to advise someone.

The purpose of this process is to lay all of our advice aside, all of our wisdom, all of our guidance, all of our thoughts about what this person ought to do, and to create a space that's to be occupied by that person and that person alone, to listen as closely as possible to his or her inner teacher aided by questions that strip away whatever obstacles may lie between my ears and my truth.

I feel a huge sense of responsibility about this. I always have and I always will. I feel fierce about it because I'm the person who has said to several people, in this case including myself, "We're going to create a space here in which your soul will be safe." I've offered that as a promissory note and I take that very seriously. I've been around the human potential movement too long and I've seen too many people wounded. Even though safety was promised they were invaded, exploited, and manipulated. I do not want that to happen on my watch, period. Amen.

I want to put this in such a way that you get a little scared about your responsibility. You should be. Not so scared you're paralyzed and not able to do it, but aware that we are suspending the normal rules of social discourse in a very profound way, and inviting you into a parallel universe, an alternate reality. The core of that alternate reality is very simple. It is the conviction that this person has an inner teacher, has wisdom and truth within herself or himself, does not need at this moment in time our wisdom, our inner teacher, our guidance. Instead, needs access to that voice within, which, as we all know, gets obscured and blocked by all kinds of things: external static, internal static. We can, in two hours this

morning, create a quiet space with those honest, open questions that help people remove whatever it is that stands between their awareness and their inner teacher.

The Clearness Committee is in a lot of ways a microcosm of the whole Circle of Trust process and when we ask people, as we've been doing for more than a decade now, of all the things we did in a Circle of Trust, the working with poetry, the silence, the journaling, the small groups. What would you say is the pearl of great price? Many people say it was the Clearness Committee that brought this all home and that really was transformative.

Chapter 9: Inner Work can change the Outer World

PARKER PALMER:

Every great movement for social change has been animated by people who did serious inner work to constellate, consolidate, and give trajectory to the powers of the human heart, because those were the only powers they had. Everything else had been taken away from them. All external forms of power. Only by taking the inner life seriously and learning how to access and aim the power that's in us, not only individually but collectively, could any of these great movements for change have happened. The black liberation movement in this country, the liberation movement in South Africa to get out from under Apartheid, in Eastern Europe to get out from under communism, in Latin America to get out from under raw exploitation of many sorts. Those are, of course, ongoing movements.

If you ask yourself what makes a Rosa Parks, or what makes a Vaclav Havel or what makes a Nelson Mandela, who spent 38 years in prison—what makes these people is their capacity to take the inner life seriously, and to tap the sources of power that lie within us, that are as important in the transformation of institutions and societies as any of the external powers that we give so much credit to.

Our theory of change certainly begins with that work of individual transformation, which we don't force on people. People have to choose that. People have to enter a free and safe space to let that emerge within themselves. That's what our Circle of Trust is all about. The Circle of Trust is also about a community of folks who both evoke that inner work from each other and then support and affirm each other, bless each other really, in carrying that inner work forward, because every one of those people I have named, the Rosa Parks', the Vaclav Havels, the Nelson Mandelas, needed not only inner work but external community to help them hold the fruits of that work and face into the challenges of being true to the inner teacher. That's not an easy thing to do. One needs a community of support in order to do it.

We believe, I believe, that the work we help people do inwardly has consequences in the larger world. I think what we're doing in Circles of Trust, for us ordinary mortals, which those three people are too, ordinary mortals, I think we're helping each other reclaim selfhood, identity and integrity, the power of our own hearts, in a way that's held with discipline and intentionality that can flow towards the transformation of institutions and larger social systems.

Chapter 10: Standing in the Tragic Gap

PARKER PALMER:

I think it's pretty obvious to a lot of people that we live in very broken times. We live in times with lots and lots of gaps between the difficult realities of life and what we know to be possible humanly. We know that we live in a world at war but we also know that it is possible to live at peace. That's a big example. We know that we live in a situation where healthcare is not available to probably the people who need it most and we know that humanly it would be possible to make it available, so on, and on, and on it goes. Everybody would have their own example of what I've come to call these tragic gaps.

I've come to believe that one of the most important qualities that a person can have in our time, a person who wants to take leadership, whether that's positional leadership or non-positional leadership, people who want simply to help make this a better world, one of the most important capacities they can have is the capacity to stand in the tragic gap however that may be defined in their lives. To stand there without flipping out on either side, to flip out on the side of too much reality is to become cynical. It's a jungle out there and I'll find some way to fight and survive. That cynicism that simply contributes to making the world a harder place. If you flip out on the other side into too much possibility then you become, I think, a kind of irrelevant idealist who simply flies above the battle without ever really descending to engage it in human terms.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

It is not easy to live in this middle ground in the space between what is and what could be. In fact, it is uncomfortable and scary, so we need communities of support where we can develop the inner strength necessary to hold both the world's reality, and our hopes for the future.

PARKER PALMER:

The capacity to stand in this tragic gap and to hold those tensions is to me one of the great human qualities that I think we help cultivate in Circles of Trust by giving people more access to that inner ground where you can stand and hold what appear to be radical opposites in a way that helps you become a co-creative agent of finding a new way through, a new way ahead. Not that the tragic gap will ever disappear. I mean I don't believe that perfection is going to happen in my lifetime anyway but that the quality of holding that tension is a quality that helps move us forward individually and collectively into something that's a little better, a little better, a little better, inviting those better angels of our nature onto the scene.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

Standing in the tragic gap can be a heartbreaking experience, but instead of breaking into pieces the heart can be broken open into larger capacity, new possibilities and more life-giving responses to the struggles of our times.

PARKER PALMER:

The whole question of how to allow that tight clenched fist of a muscle called the heart, to allow it to open into a larger more capacious vessel—I think that's one that we work on constantly in our Circles of Trust. I think the opening of the heart in ways that allow us to stand in this tragic gap is one of the most important contributions that this kind of work can make to the suffering world.

Chapter 11: Nonviolence in Everyday Life

WOMAN NARRATOR:

One of the gifts we are given in a Circle of Trust is a chance to see how abnormal violence is. Here, surrounded by ground rules that help us relate to others in life-giving ways, we experience our innate capacity to honor, not violate, the identity and integrity of every human being, including ourselves. As we create a safe space for each other's soul, we discover what it means to live nonviolently and we develop a vision of how we might live that way in daily life.

PARKER PALMER:

It's not just in relation to war in the world, as important as it is that we take a nonviolent position towards problem-solving on a global scale, I believe, but that the workplace which is the battlefield of many people's lives in the sense that it's where they feel their identity and integrity threatened so often. As that doctor does, that said to me a few months ago, "I work in a situation where every day they have me right on the edge of violating my Hippocratic oath." Well that's violence. That's institutional violence.

We understand that violence isn't something we do only with bombs and bullets, or with punches and kicks, but we do it institutionally. We do it verbally. We do it in our relationships to each other by violating the integrity of the other person's soul. How do you keep from violating the integrity of another person's soul? I think you start by learning to honor the integrity of your own. You cannot give to another person what you don't give to yourself. It's just impossible.

WOMAN NARRATOR:

Nonviolence means a commitment to act in every situation in ways that honor the soul. In Circles of Trust, we begin to see how the Principles and Practices of the circle can be exported to other parts of our worlds: to the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, and the public arena.

PARKER PALMER:

Very concretely, with some of our teachers for example, they report that having learned in circles of trust a nonviolent way of receiving ideas that they disagree with where normally they would have run at that idea or at the person holding that idea with their own opinion and created the head-on collision which is our normal model of how we're supposed to engage in change. They learn instead to be receptive, to be open, to turn to wonder about where this comes from in this person's life and then to ask an honest, open question, which not only helps hear that other into deeper speech, but sometimes will help me, the questioner, hear that there's more that we have in common than I thought at first blush.

It takes time. It's slow. It doesn't happen overnight, but if you're persistent, some mutual understanding starting to build, which I think represents very concretely nonviolence in the workplace and creates both a more peaceable and more fruitful outcome for people in working situations when they learn how to honor the soul of the other, which is what I mean by nonviolence.

Chapter 12: The Soul of the Citizen

PARKER PALMER:

We think a lot these days about Circles of Trust as something of a model of the kind of community that needs to be out there for citizens to recover their capacity to approach our common life in this country with decency, with openness, with generosity, and with a lack of fear, which again is the root problem that Courage to Teach, Courage to Lead, Courage to Serve, is trying to address. The fear that so often paralyzes us and shuts us down.

Of course, in our society these days, nationally and globally, the fear in a very sharp and paralyzing way is a fear of the other, whoever that may be, the person of another color, the person of another religion, the person of another ethnicity. If we are going to recover the citizenly habits that make a democracy work, we need to have this country dotted, through our churches and synagogues and mosques, through our schools, even in our workplaces, all kinds of institutional settings. We need to have this country dotted with circles of people who are learning to talk to one another in a creative way about common problems on which they have quite different opinions.

I remember, some years ago, visiting a place in Tennessee, called the Highlander Folk Center. I think it's now called the Highlander Research Center, and the Highlander Research Center, when I visited it, was essentially a farmhouse with some other buildings out in the middle of the Tennessee countryside. In the living room, the big old living room of this big old farmhouse, there were about 20 Tennessee rocking chairs in a circle. I was powerfully reminded that it was in that circle, at that place, that people like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, and lots of others whose names we don't know that well, gathered together in the '50s, whites and blacks in the same circle, together across racial lines, for the first time, in that era of Southern life, talking about what it was like to be a black person and to be a white person in a highly segregated society and the price that everybody was paying for that.

Out of telling those stories and out of the mutual understanding that emerged, and then out of some very specific training and non-violence, which made those circles different from Circles of Trust as we hold them, but out of that sitting in circle, telling stories, sharing of lives, touching the soul, rejoining it with the citizenly role, came a Civil Rights Movement, which was one of the great acts of citizenship of the 20th century.

A history like that and the fact that so much has happened out of these small circles of people, learning to tell each other the truth, in a generous and hospitable way, neither giving nor taking offense, a story like that reminds me of the power of Circles of Trust to restore the soul of the citizen and, in turn, to help restore the soul of democracy.

Extra: A Conversation with Rick & Marcy Jackson and Parker Palmer

PARKER PALMER:

My name is Parker Palmer. I'm here with my good friends and colleagues Rick Jackson and Marcy Jackson, co-directors of the Center for Courage and Renewal. With the joy of some time to have a conversation about the friendship and work we have shared for twenty-five years now, of we go all the way back. It really does amazing me, Rick, first of all that you and I met twenty-five years ago, I guess on the basis of a piece of writing I had done.

Then I remember a few years later, just maybe five years later, that was in maybe '82, meeting Marcy at your home in Minneapolis when we were together planning a retreat for Kellogg National Fellows, in which not only the fellows, but the spouses were to be fully involved. We went ahead in did that in Taos, New Mexico. It's amazing to look back for me to say, "Twenty-five years ago, you and I meet. Twenty years ago, I meet Marcy. Fifteen years ago, we start working together to create a program called the Courage to Teach. Ten years ago, the Center for Courage and Renewal is established. You become the co-directors. I become your close partner in all of that, you mine."

Here we are today to talk about a stream of work that has grown from a trickle to a flood around the country, serving so many people, not least us, wonderfully well. Today we're able to look around the country and see a hundred fifty facilitators working in thirty states and fifty cities, hosting these Circles of Trust for teachers and administrators and lawyers and physicians. Doing remarkable transformational work in the lives of these people, hundreds, maybe thousands of people and the institutions they serve.

I guess what strikes me at this moment is how all of that is rooted in a friendship that started a long time ago. The way in which somehow friendship and vocation seem to go together in a mysterious and wonderful way, that when you meet someone that you identify as a friend, somehow part of that is recognizing that you share a reason for being on Earth. You share a purpose or a mission. Do you know what I'm saying?

RICK JACKSON:

I do, Parker. I remember meeting you first, as many people meet you first, in a piece of your writing. I was in campus ministry, and you were doing a lot of work with campus ministries through the Danforth Foundation at that time. You'd written a piece called *Campus Ministry: A Pastoral and Political Vocation*, holding a paradox as so much of your writing does. I felt found. I felt discovered at that point as I read that. As it turns, within a year, we were able to meet, and you spoke to a national gathering of folks.

PARKER PALMER:

I remember when we met, I just felt, "Here's a guy whose heart is in the right place, whose mind is right there with his heart." That's how I felt when I met Marcy too, someone whose gifts just could help carry this work forward and also kind of help me expand my own life. I mean, I think that's how I felt about both of you. Wonderful, shared sense of friendship and vocation.

It's amazing to look back at those early, almost unconscious origins. To say then that in the early '90s with the help of our friends at the Fetzer Institute, we started, I at first, started putting together a

program for teachers called The Courage to Teach, which created these hospital spaces, like the ones we created at Taos or those Kellogg Fellows and spouses.

Then when it became clear that this program for teachers was something they wanted and needed, and that the Fetzer Institute wanted to help multiply around the country, and the question arose, "Who should, who should help us institutionalize this program and lead that institutionalization?" You were the ones. You were the ones.

RICK JACKSON:

In light of what we were just talking about, it also strikes me as very interesting that none of us have ever said, "Can I hire you to do this or that?" There's been a kind of deep listening, followed by invitations that just kind of keep going. I think that's certainly not limited to us. It's kind of flowed right out into this wonderful, leadership-rich network of colleagues we have around the country that I think is marked mostly by this quality of invitational leadership.

Gifts are recognized. Gifts are invited forward. Something about the contributing of those gifts enlivens the collectivist, as well as brings aliveness to the individual. That's certainly been the case for me, I think for us, Parker, in working with you.

PARKER PALMER:

It reminds me, Rick, of the immediate prehistory of the Center for Courage and Renewal, which at the time we were calling the Center for Teacher Formation, because we were working with teachers almost exclusively, and only later started getting these calls from physicians and lawyers and others, which led to the name change. I remember very clearly having done that pilot group of K through twelve teachers at the Fetzer Institute in what? '93, '94, I think it was...

MARCY JACKSON:

'94 to '96.

PARKER PALMER:

'94 to '96, that's right. And the Fetzer Institute deciding, "This is good stuff. We need to see if it can be replicated around the country. Does it work when Parker isn't there? Does it work when we're not operating at our lovely retreat center?"

MARCY JACKSON:

I remember in the early days when we began meeting. That was actually after just the first six of us were identified, I think to help you figure out what the heck you were doing, and how we could take it to work with other groups. We met in your family room. We kind of just, we learned it by doing some of these things together, working with poetry, doing whatever. We also had a lot of laughs.

PARKER PALMER:

We had a series of gatherings at Fetzer, from people who said, "We're interested in this." Of course, you two were part of that. Out of a series of meetings, we did this discernment that you were just talking about, like, "Who is really called to this, and who feels like kindred spirit?" You know. Out of that came you two and four other people who then, either solo or in pairs, replicated the program in four locations around the country. That was the period that you were just talking about, Marcy.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right, right.

PARKER PALMER:

When we met at our house, between each of those retreats. It was this eight retreat series, meeting seasonally over a two-year period. I just remember those meetings as so rich when we'd be sitting down and saying, "Now, what just happened? What went well? What didn't go so well? What does it mean to facilitate a group where the purpose is to make safe space for the soul, so people can hear the inner teacher speak, make a claim on their lives? Then, what's going to happen, what's likely to happen next based on Parker's experience with the pilot group?" Those were such rich community building days. To be sitting that way in a shared vocation was really extraordinary. Since then, of course, things have gotten so much bigger.

MARCY JACKSON:

I was thinking about how it was really out of those experiences that when we came to begin the Center, and then consider how we are going to do a Facilitator Preparation or invite other people into leadership, because surprise, surprise, these test sites were all successful as well.

PARKER PALMER:

Very.

MARCY JACKSON:

Very well received. There was more interest and call for these kinds of program. I just remember out of that experience of how we sat with you and picked your brain about, not only picked your brain, really experienced some of the work together, shared our experiences.

We realized this was never going to be a train the trainer model. That it really was preparation rather than training, and that it was a kind of ... I think of it now as a kind of embodied leadership development process that begins with people having some deep experience of their own with this approach before they imagine leading it for others. I feel like we have stayed true to some of the original ways that we kind of stumbled into how to do this in the beginning through our conversations with you.

PARKER PALMER:

Yes. Yeah.

MARCY JACKSON:

Together.

PARKER PALMER:

Really emerging out of community and out of the identity and integrity of each facilitator.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right.

PARKER PALMER:

Finding a process that, I think this is one of the many areas where you two have been brilliant in your leadership. To find a process that could replicate this thing that went on in our living room, but do it on a national scale in much more organizational terms. I really feel that you've been faithful to that.

That's the continuing to operate, as you say, not out of a training model where you say, "Okay, here's the notebook. We're now going to go through and teach you how to turn the crank on this method," but really starting each time with, "Who are you in relation to this intentionality? How can you learn to hold a space that's safe for other people's souls? How can you do that in a way that honors the core principles that we have been able to articulate, that we take very seriously and hold very dearly, and yet embody those principles or honor those principles in your own unique way?" To find a process that supports that has been fabulous. Now, what? Almost a hundred fifty facilitators.

MARCY JACKSON:

You mentioned it being a national program, which is true. Yet, we've continued to have these cohorts over these last ten years be quite small in terms of what we felt was appropriate for the kind of process we wanted to have with these people, and the depth we want to go with them.

Another thing I was just thinking about that you said was there from the beginning, and we've carried this on is a very careful discernment process that involves never just taking somebody on paper because they think this is what they are next to be doing. Instead to kind of, in some ways take a journey with them, have a chance for them to meet us, us to meet them, to really look at their capacity to create that kind of hospitable yet charged space. Where, you mentioned the words, I think, compassion, competent, and I'd say compelling as well, as something that we're creating here.

PARKER PALMER:

Absolutely.

MARCY JACKSON:

It's been increasingly difficult to, I think engage in that discernment process, but I think no less important for maintaining the integrity and the quality of the leadership of this work.

PARKER PALMER:

Difficult, why? Because of size, scale?

MARCY JACKSON:

Yeah, because there's more interest now, which is, you know, that's the good news. I'd say there's more interest of people that may read your books, not have had any experience of this, but imagine that they just want to jump right into becoming a facilitator. Just a lot of conversations about why we feel that it needs to be approached from a basis of some experience ahead of time.

The other thing that's difficult, but is also a great gift for us, is we tend to draw people who are already very competent and skilled in their own field. They've been doing other kinds of facilitation or teaching or consulting or whatever it is, and are often skilled, whether it's physicians, teachers, educational leaders, clergy, all of those. We have people in all of those professions in our network.

This is asking them in a sense to step back, to become a learner again of a different way. A way that is more spare and much less about ... It's not sage on the stage. It's much more guide on the side. It's much more asking me to create a space of almost spaciousness in myself before I can create that for the group. It's subtle.

PARKER PALMER:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MARCY JACKSON:

And exciting, I think.

PARKER PALMER:

I think one very exciting for me and very subtle, and one thing that we've always said that I think, I understand the truth of this more every day. You have to be doing this for yourself in order to be doing it for others. To come into this program and seek preparation as a facilitator means a commitment to be on your own journey toward inner truth, inner teacher rejoining soul and role.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right, right.

PARKER PALMER:

You typically prepare no more than what? Fifteen people every year.

MARCY JACKSON:

Yeah. Initially it was twelve. Now our cohort's are say, I'd say sixteen to twenty people a year.

PARKER PALMER:

That many?

MARCY JACKSON:

It involves mentoring, a mentoring process. We have our experienced facilitators serving in that role and creating a really nice sense of partnership and then being an encourager and a conversation partner and so forth with them.

PARKER PALMER:

Yeah. This, and I know Rick in your work in organizational development on behalf of the center and financial development, you often come under pressure to ramp it up, which is the model of success in our society that flies right in the face of these things Marcy is talking about, right?

RICK JACKSON:

Yes we do. A and B, every additional person that comes into our network of relationships brings with them their own organizational experience or default mode. Sometimes that's very helpful. As is usually the case for each of us, there's also some disappointments or wounds there. We hold a lot of paradoxes in this work. We draw our lead from your thinking, Parker, in the richness of paradox. One of the fundamental ones organizationally is to hold movement sensibilities. Sensibilities that begin with our

own sense of integrity, and the difficult decisions that may need to be made, so that I'm on my own path of aliveness and service.

Movement sensibilities alongside organizational sensibilities. Our question early on when invited to form the Center was, "How can we create structures to support a movement, and how do we hold that paradox together realizing that we are an educational nonprofit now?" We are an organization, and yet we are wanting to be in service of integrity of individuals and a kind of wholeheartedness on the part of organizational life.

PARKER PALMER:

Yeah. One of the phrases I've always loved is that emerged between and betwixt us. I think all of this work emerges between and betwixt us. It's not full. It doesn't come full blown from the head of Zeus. It's what Martin Buber meant when he said, "All real living is meeting, and what happens between the parties who meet." I've loved this phrase that emerged between us, that what we're attempting to do, what we're committed to doing is building a chain of integrity.

RICK JACKSON:

Right.

PARKER PALMER:

Every link in that chain, whether it's a financial link or a personal link in terms of facilitators or an institutional partnership, whatever it may be. Staff relationships have the same integrity as the link before.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right, right.

PARKER PALMER:

If we can stay with that, we will have what I think we know have, which is an organization that is becoming more visible. The books have sold wonderfully well. We've touched thousands and thousands of lives directly. We've made a contribution to the national discourse indirectly in a very large way.

Constantly, constantly testing that in these small-scale Circles of Trust, where we learn what we need to learn about ourselves and the people we wish to serve, where we test our own integrity, where we generate the ideas that we then want to articulate. At the same time with all that kind of success, resisting the conventional model of success, which is McDonald's everywhere, franchises.

RICK JACKSON:

Turn it into a notebook.

PARKER PALMER:

A notebook and a training model. I feel on behalf of us, I feel very, very proud about that. You're the ones who have really shepherded that process at all these levels. These are not gifts that I have. I don't have the patience to do that. I barely have the patience to get a book written. I don't have the patience to do all the negotiating needed to run a complex organization, especially in this counterculture or upstream way.

This notion of friendship, vocation, and shared gifts, diverse gifts that we honor in each other, and that get shared to create a sum that's a whole that's larger than the sum of its parts. This is powerful, not just metaphor for us, but for me now, it's lived experience. I find that very, you know, very, very exciting. To actually have lived into things that as a younger person I thought, "I believe that. I think that's true. I like that idea a lot. Not sure I've ever seen it." Now I've seen it. By now, I've seen it.

MARCY JACKSON:

It's been a tremendous gift for us. Not just in giving leadership to the Center over these last ten years, but to work so closely with you in doing that, and beginning some of our early work of facilitator preparation in your home and growing this amazing community of colleagues, now around the country that are carrying this work forward. It just continues to be a great gift.

RICK JACKSON:

This conversation is helping me think of the arc in my own life of this work, from when we first met, I was fairly young in campus ministry, working with young adults around, as a friend of ours calls it, the "big questions and worthy dreams" that somebody in their early twenties hopefully is naturally holding.

Now in this work with people in various professions, as you say, educators and people in a variety of very, very important, and yet very challenging serving professions, this work is helping us all reengage those big questions and worthy dreams. Yet at a mature point in our lives, realizing that we really still want to bring our very best, our wholest hearts, as it were, to this work. That is both challenging, and yet it's why we're here.

PARKER PALMER:

It's amazing. When we ask, "Well, what is it that I have to bring in my work?" Our minds so often turn to the skills we learned at school or the knowledge that we've gathered there. Of course that's important. The people we work with are doing work where the technical demands are considerable. Yet, the ultimate gift that anyone has to bring, the deepest and the most important gift is full engagement of the self, full engagement of the heart with the mind and the skilled hand.

When that heart isn't there, all that skill and all that knowledge not only kind of show up in weaker and weaker form, but can actually kind of turn to the dark side. I mean, it can become manipulation. It can become power and control. It can become the doctor who treats the patient like a machine to be fixed, rather than a human being to be engaged in his or her healing.

As we talk about this stuff, we get into very complex stuff about mind, body, spirit, heart interaction, and the research that shows that students learn better when they're in the presence of a whole teacher, or sick people get well faster or learn to hold their incurable disease in a more life-giving way in the presence of a whole-hearted physician. The simple reality behind all of that is, you have to establish hospitality and generosity to let that into the world.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right, right.

PARKER PALMER:

As long as the settings in which we work don't have those qualities, that's not going to come forth. People are going to keep that tucked away, because it makes them vulnerable. The great gift I think that we've discovered is out of ... I mean, I'm thinking of the fact that in the twenty-five years that we've, in one way or another, journeyed together, we've had our own struggles of the heart. We've had our own pains and suffering. Who hasn't over that period of time?

This friendship that has helped each of us carry some of that in our own lives, that has given the hospitable space and the generosity of heart to let a person deal with those issues in his or her own time and own level and own way, that personal gift that we give each other is all in the world we want to give to anybody else.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right.

RICK JACKSON:

That's right.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right, right. One of the things I'm thinking about is how so consistently over these years, you've continued to ask yourself about where is your own vocation leading you or calling you. You've consistently asked us to reflect on that as well. Never just assuming that we've created this thing together, and now it's kind of out on it's own, and we just serve it, but that it's a dynamic relationship, that it's ever evolving. Our work with you is ever unfolding. That's been one of the real exciting things about it as we've gotten to, not just partner with you on programs, but the writing that you've been doing, and how that so contributed this whole, the growth of this movement. Your relationship even to the Center as an organization.

PARKER PALMER:

Right, that's been a very important, as you know, piece of this for me. Since the Center got up and running as a formal organization in what? 1997?

MARCY JACKSON:

'97.

PARKER PALMER:

'97, so ten years of the center now with this prehistory as necessary foundation to that sort of demonstration plot, seedbed. Since the center got up and running, I've published, what? *The Courage to Teach, Let your Life Speak, A Hidden Wholeness*. Together, we've worked on *Teaching with Fire: The Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Teach, Stories of the Courage to Teach*. These books, of course, with our good friends Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner, so many amazing collaborators, colleagues, and also friends with a shared vocation, who I wish were in the room with us.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right, right.

PARKER PALMER:

It would need a much bigger room.

MARCY JACKSON:

Don't forget *Living the Questions*.

PARKER PALMER:

Living, well, *Living the Questions*, right, right.

MARCY JACKSON:

Which was a book of, that collection of amazing writing about the way your work has impacted so many.

PARKER PALMER:

I can't imagine any of these books coming out had I just been out there on my lonesome, trying to write. These are such communal, collaborative efforts from where I sit. So deeply influenced by dialogues that we've had and of course, my wife Sharon Palmer has been very much part of the hosting of the program as well of the writing and the development of the books. I see all of this as so profoundly communal. Here I am now, not however old I was when we met. You mentioned being young a while ago, and I'd forgotten about that part of my life, even though in some ways I still feel very young.

RICK JACKSON:

I don't think you've forgotten.

PARKER PALMER:

I'm sixty-eight years old, and I've had for twenty-five years a vocation that has taken me all over the country, on airplanes, different hotel every night, audiences ranging from a few to a few thousand, workshops, lectures. A kind of scatter shot approach that I guess Johnny Appleseed for a Quaker might be a better image, you know, rather than the shotgun metaphor. Trying to spread seeds of possibility. I value. I value those opportunities, and the many good people they've been able, that's enabled me to meet, and the way in which the seed got spread. Some of it did germinate and grow.

In the last few years, I've realized that I'm a very lucky person in that this shared work that we've been doing together has now ... Is no longer a bunch of separate little trickles. It's a considerable stream. A lot of people have been able to, what? Launch their boats on it.

MARCY JACKSON:

Right, right.

PARKER PALMER:

Drink from it, just as we have. It's work we need as much as anybody else. I want increasingly in the next, however many years I'm given, for my personal work to become more publicly identified as what it already is, which is our collective work, so that my institutional affiliation now becomes with the Center for Courage and Renewal. Everything I do is publicly identified in relation to that vehicle. These partnerships, these friendships, this shared vocation is for me, the pearl of great price. That's priceless beyond measure. I want to name it and claim it as such.

RICK JACKSON:

Thank you, Parker.

MARCY JACKSON:

Yes, thank you.

Extra: The Clearness Committee in Greater Detail

PARKER PALMER:

It's hard work to think about standing in the tragic gap, not passively but in a way that helps something happen there that's for the common good. It's hard work to draw deep for those sources of courage in our own life and to embrace the fact that we both have courage and are called to courage. The question arises where does one find nourishment and sustenance for that hard work? I want to suggest that the Clearness Committee, or this way of holding each other on the shoulder, is one answer to that. It's not the only answer, but one answer, and an answer that in my life and in the lives of a number of people I know has been a powerful one, a powerful source of nurture and sustenance.

Let me turn to the schedule now and just walk through this process before we start digging into the depths of it. At 9:45, thereabouts, we're going to sit down in silence in these spaces in a small face-to-face circle and the silence will be broken by the focus person when he or she is ready to begin. Right away our job is to hold a quiet, centered, focused space without chitchat. For several hours this morning we are suspending the normal rules of social interaction and we're going to do something very different for reasons I'll try to explain in a moment.

From 9:45 to 10:00 the focus person will describe his or her issue while committee members listen without interruption. They may stop before 10:00. They certainly won't go on much longer than that and our job during that time is to listen. They will give us a clear signal when they are ready to start receiving questions. From 10:00 to 11:30 the rule is questions only. Committee members may not speak to the focus person in any way except to ask brief, honest, open questions. This is where we're going to do some work this morning about what is ruled out and what is ruled in because our behavior during this time, our verbal behavior and our nonverbal behavior is very important. It's the core and the heart of the process.

Mirroring can be a very valuable moment in this process. You've sat and listened deeply to this person for an hour and three quarter, hour and a half, and yet it's also that slippery slope where we might slide back towards trying to advise, fix, save, set someone straight. If you can remember during this time that you serve this person best by being a literal mirror, and I will illustrate what I mean. If you say to the focus person, "When you were asked this question, this is how you answered." Amen. I simply invite you to look at that as the subtext, the implicit message. You don't say why you think that's important. You obviously think it's important but you don't tell them why. You don't do anything except hold up a mirror that reminds them of a question that was asked and an answer that was given.

There is a second kind of mirroring where you say, "I invite you to look at three questions and three answers simultaneously." You obviously have a theory about why those hang together in some way but you are not to say what that theory is. You are simply to mirror that these three questions were asked and these three answers were given. You let the focus person make of that whatever he or she wants to make of it. Constantly the effort here is to withdrawal our own desire to shape this process or to interpret what's going on or to import our own wisdom and simply to let the person get a clear bead on the inner teacher, on their own inner wisdom.

Body language mirroring can be very valuable. It's even trickier. It's harder to do. You have to be a phenomenological to do it. Good mirroring would say, "When you were asked about job A, your voice

grew soft and your eyes were downcast. When you were asked about job B, your head was erect and your voice was loud." You'll notice what I didn't do there. I didn't say, "When you were asked about job A you seemed subdued and depressed. When you were asked about job B you seemed enthusiastic and excited. Don't you think it's job B? Why don't you go sign up right now?"

The point being, even though I think I know, I have no idea what those downcast eyes and that soft voice really mean. Quite the contrary it may not be depression. It may be this is the most serious possibility I've looked at for a long time and I'm considering it deeply. I can't get inside another person and interpret them. My job here is to remember that and to not invade this person's soul, this person's inner space. If the focus person invites mirroring, those are the disciplines we need to practice and it can be enormously valuable in that last fifteen minutes to help a person re-gather things that have come from within herself or himself and simply have a chance to look at them again before the group disbands.

With five minutes left someone is going to say, "We now invite affirmations and celebrations" and I'll tell you what I told the focus persons last night. In the dozens and dozens, maybe over a hundred by now Clearness Committees I've done, I have never known those affirmations and celebrations to be gratuitous or forced. They've always been authentic and deeply felt. It's simply an enormous privilege to be in the presence of another person's soul and two hours later you will feel that privilege and you will feel the mystery of the human self and you will want to celebrate the shared journey and this person who has given you the gift of a peace of his or her life and because we value that gift and this offering that these three people are making to us so deeply, we will abide faithfully by the rule of double confidentiality, which means A) nothing said by the focus person in this group or any of the questions asked will ever be repeated to another soul even if that person was in the group. Group members will not talk about this when it's over. Our job when it's over is to continue to hold the focus person in our thoughts and the light in whatever way you hold people.

Secondly, the second part of double confidentiality is that none of us is at liberty after the Clearness Committee to come up to the person a day later, a week later, a month later and say, "You remember when you said this? I had a thought about that." We hold this sacred space forever, henceforth and ever more. We do not later invade the focus person with our fixes, counsels, and advices. Focus people have said time and again that second part of the confidentiality rule liberated me to do what I needed to be doing here, which is to have the deepest possible conversation with myself knowing that it will stop there and if one of them wants to come to us and say, "Would you sit and talk with me?" They're at liberty to do that. We're not at liberty to approach them.

Your job as members of the committee this morning is to create a space that is to be occupied by the focus person and the focus person alone for two hours. If you can remember to keep yourself out of that space, both in a verbal way and in an energetic way, right now I'm leaning into this space, right? My energetics are taking me to the middle of this because I've got a message I'm trying to convey. If I'm a member of a committee this morning, I need to lean back, breathe deep, not lean in, and simply hold the space for this person to occupy herself or himself without me being in there. This has all kind of practical implications. If the focus person starts to cry I'm likely to do that this morning because I'm going to be dealing with some stuff that touches my emotional life pretty deeply.

Members of my committee are not liberty to comfort me. They're not at liberty to move into that space with a Kleenex or a hand on the arm that says all will be well because as soon as they do that they have occupied my space and they have changed this from my dialogue with my inner teacher, to a social

relationship with them in which I now have to worry about what they're thinking about my condition and making them feel like they're good caregivers. This is exactly what needs not to happen. This is not your father's Oldsmobile. I need a space in which I can sit there and ask myself what are those tears really about and maybe some caring person in the circle will ask that as an honest, open question. "Where do you think those tears are coming from?" That's a fair question, but comforting me or trying to help me get rid of those tears or being embarrassed on my behalf about the tears is not serving me well in this situation.

Always keeping yourself out of the space, leaning back, and yet being fully attentive just intense with your intentionality being to support me and my inner dialogue. I may get off a good joke. You're certainly free to smile gently. You are not free to join me in ruckus laughter. It's been pointed out to me more than once that I'm always the first person to laugh at my jokes and sometimes the only person. In this setting, you don't join me in laughter because I need a chance to ask myself am I using my sense of humor to blow off an issue that's really kind of painful to me? I do that sometimes. This two-hour period is an opportunity to reflect on that but that opportunity is taken from me if you join me in laughter and turn this into a social occasion. You're holding the space with a simple intentionality, a simple focus, a simple attentiveness, a remembering that it's my inner teacher that counts. You aren't going like this, which is inattentive and disrespectful nor are you leaning in. You are neither invading nor evading. You are simply holding me present and intentionality that I might have a dialogue with my inner teacher.

Now, there's one other thing in this regard before I get to the questions that I talked to the focus people about last night. You have been doing something in the fifteen minutes we've been together so far that's helpful to me under these circumstances. You've been nodding when you get it. You've been looking puzzled when you don't get it. You've been giving me clues about what I have to say more about or what I've said enough about. Under these circumstances that's helpful but in a Clearness Committee these nonverbal signals that we give each other are radically unhelpful because they turn it back into a conventional social situation where my job, and I'm going to be a focus person this morning, subtly becomes persuading you that I'm on the right track so that I get you going like this rather than like this, right?

That's hard stuff to break. It's very hard for you, as members of the committee, when you hear my problem and I'm struggling with something not to look sympathetic and to nod and to smile and to encourage me but in doing so, you maybe leading me down the worst goat trail of my life and depriving me of a chance to find my own path. How do you deal with that? Simple. I've said to the focus people you are at liberty to close your eyes for the full two hours to hear those questions with your eyes closed, to respond to them with your eyes closed. If that's not comfortable you can look at the center of the circle while you hear the questions and answer the questions or you can look at the ceiling or out the window. Members of the committee are to hold this person in steady attention, but the focus person is to disengage from us as much as possible so that you are really, the focus person is really, having a conversation with herself or himself.

This is very counter-cultural. This is what you call rude under normal circumstances but in these circumstances it's the only thing that works and I will tell you exactly. It came to me in a Clearness Committee several years ago. The power of this, for me as a focus person, the power is that at some point in this process this morning I will be asked a question that will take me to a place of truth that I don't want to talk about. If my eyes are closed and I have gotten the message inwardly that this is not about persuading anybody of anything, of seeking approval or being worried about disapproval, I will be

sitting there thinking the only person I have to fool here is myself and why would I want to do that? I will therefore be encouraged to answer honestly.

Questions only. Honest, open questions. I've never found an ironclad way to generalize about what an honest, open question is. Here's the closest I can come. An honest, open question is one you ask without possibly being able to sit there and think I know the right answer or the best answer to this question and I sure hope you give it to me. If there's any energy like that in you, sit on the question. Don't ask it. An honest, open question is one you ask without possibly being able to imagine what the right answer is.

Let me give you a couple of examples. If I ask, if I'm a member of the committee and I ask the focus person, "The situation you just described. How did you feel about that?" That's a good honest, open question. It allows that person to name some emotions but if I listen to that list of emotions and I notice that anger is missing and I'm saying to myself, "Boy, if I'd been in that situation I would have felt angry" and then I ask the question, "What about anger?" That's not a good honest, open question.

Now that's a level of subtlety that's hard to attend to but what I've done in effect, given where that question came from, is I might as well have said, "You know if I'd been there I would have felt angry. Why didn't you?" That's invasive and you don't want to do that. You must not do that. I said to the focus people last night, "Everybody in this circle is going to be trying very hard to keep the rules and sometimes we're going to screw up and we can forgive each other for that." I also said to them, "If anything happens in this circle that does not serve your soul you, the focus person, are at liberty to say that doesn't feel like an honest, open question to me or things are moving too fast here or I'm being pressed in an area that I don't want to explore."

If the focus person says that, the person to whom they say it is not at liberty to defend herself or himself or to explain herself or himself because again, that's to invade the space with your agenda. "Oh, I said that because you said this and I thought that and therefore or please forgive me." Nothing. Your only option is to listen to that, to sit back, and try to reenter the process later in a more helpful way. That's the only option you have.

The pacing of the questions is important. It's not a grilling or a cross-examination. Let there be spaces between questions and responses. The focus person may ask us to slow it down if it's moving too quickly for him or her. If you find yourself asking a question you may well feel a need for a follow up question and that's fine, but if you find yourself about to ask the third question in a row before someone else has asked a question, you're probably getting into trouble. Take that as a boundary marker and pull back. Open up that space.

Just a final image or two, there's so many images that have helped me try to serve other people well in this process. One of them, frankly, is the image of sitting at the bedside of a dying person. I know that sounds a little odd but there's a powerful parallel here. I've done that a time or two and I've learned two things that I hope to remember. One is that in this moment I realize, maybe for the first time in a while, that I don't have a fix for this problem. My job is not to fix this person up but is to bare witness, to be fully present, to offer love and compassion in a quiet, holding way. I'm not to invade because I can't do anything in there. I can just hold them in my presence and at the same time I learn not to evade, that the most disrespectful thing would be to run from the room because what I'm looking at is too problematic or too struggling or too difficult to want to bear. I'm going to keep my eyes on them. I'm going to hold them in my attention because it would be disrespectful not to. Maybe for some of us,

remembering that this is like sitting at the bedside of a dying person, where you neither invade nor evade could be a helpful image.

The image I always like to close with is this very simple one, that for the next two hours we're going to be doing something that is very much like holding a small bird in our open hands, our open minds, our open hearts, and during those two hours we're going to face at least three temptations. One is that in the first fifteen or twenty or thirty minutes, the hands start to close around that bird and we want to pluck the feathers and sort of do this dissecting thing we do with our minds, analyze this person to pieces, try to figure out what the heck is going on here and why don't they see what I see. That's the way the mind works and we are to resist that temptation. Our task is simply to keep our hands open and hold the bird. We're not going to do dissecting with our minds this morning and if we don't do it with our minds we won't do it with our mouths.

The second temptation that comes after an hour or two, and we're past that dissecting thing, we're not sort of into the mystery of another life that is being shared at a deep level and we've come into that more respectful receptive mode, is that the hands are going to get weary and we're going to want to lay this down for a while. That means the attention wanders. The intentionality disappears and I just want to say to us a bird is a very light thing to hold. A soul is even lighter. We can do this for two hours. We have enough upper body strength to do that for two hours. All we have to do is pay attention to it.

The third and final temptation comes maybe toward the end, which is sort of like this. Please, fly. Show us that you've solved your problem. We put all this time and energy into you. We need to remember that this bird will fly on its own schedule and that the fruit of our work this morning, the proof that we have done this well, is not that the bird flies but that we can say we faithfully held for two hours and when the two hours are over those hands can withdrawal into the heart and we can hold that person for a long, long time to come. That's all we're asked to do. To be faithful to the holding, the holding of the space, where this person can have a conversation about something important with him or herself.