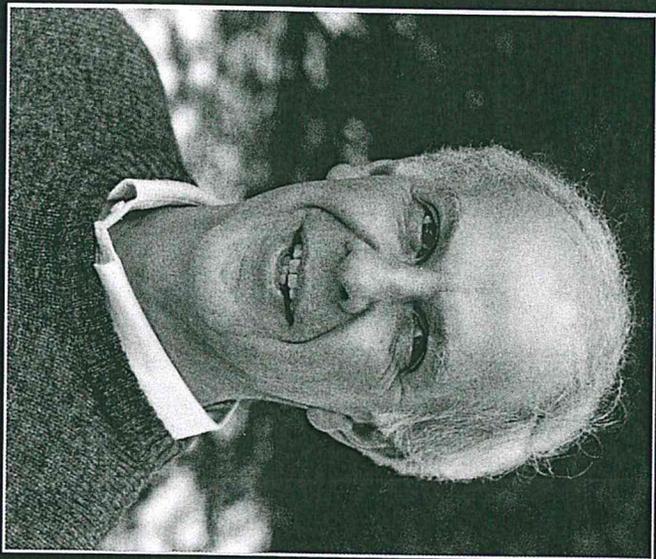


photo by Sharon L. Palmer



a time when many of us seek ways of working and living that are resonant with our souls, *A Hidden Wholeness* offers insight into our hidden and guidance for finding what we seek—within ourselves with each other.

The soul is generous: it takes in the needs of the world. The soul is wise: it offers without shutting down. The soul is hopeful: it engages the world in ways that keep opening our hearts. The soul is creative: it finds a way between realities that might defeat us and fantasies that are mere wishes. All we need to do is to bring down the wall that separates us from our own souls and deprives the world of the soul's regenerative gifts.”

—From *A Hidden Wholeness*

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Parker J. Palmer A HIDDEN WHOLENESSES

A HIDDEN WHOLENESSES



The Journey
Toward
An Undivided Life

•
Welcoming the Soul
and Weaving Community
in a Wounded World

PARKER J. PALMER

Author of *Let Your Life Speak* and *The Courage to Teach*



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CHAPTER VII

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Deep Speaks to Deep
Learning to Speak and Listen

*And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.*

—WILLIAM STAFFORD¹

🌀 A Tale of the Inner Teacher 🌀

Approaching soul truth “on the slant” through the use of third things helps create a circle of trust. But we make or break that circle by the way we speak, listen, and respond to each other about a poem, a topic, a feeling, or a problem. Here we are governed by that simple but countercultural rule, “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.” I want to tell a story about how difficult—and revelatory—abiding by that rule can be.

In a racially diverse circle of trust, there was a white middle school teacher, Janet, who sat through the first retreat in silence, looking angry and distracted. No one invaded Janet by asking her what was wrong or evaded her by pretending she was not there. Instead, people went on with their dialogue while remaining present and open to her, waiting for her soul to appear.

At the start of the second retreat, as the group explored a poem that touched on racial issues, Janet’s grievances began to spill out. She was having a terrible time in her classroom, and it was all the fault of “those students,” and all of “those students” were black. But no one invaded Janet by challenging her about racism or evaded her by pretending she was not there—this despite the fact that there were a number of teachers in the circle, black and white, who must have been deeply upset about what their colleague was saying. Instead, everyone continued to wait for Janet’s soul.

Sometimes Janet’s grievances were received in respectful silence before someone said something else about the poem. Occasionally, someone responded to her with an honest, open question, giving her an opportunity to explore the situation—“What first happened that made you feel this way?” or “What do you find most difficult about so-and-so?”—though Janet almost always

used such questions, not to explore, but to expand on her complaints.

From time to time, other teachers spoke of binds they had gotten into with their students, and a couple of black teachers told stories of their own struggles with students who happened to be white. These stories were told, not in judgment of Janet, but as honest testimony to the fact that we are all in this together. And one story involved such a hilarious moment of cultural “crossed wires” that this heavy topic became a little lighter for a while.

Janet struggled with her demons during the second and third retreats. Then, at the fourth retreat, something remarkable happened. Speaking through tears, Janet told the group that after the last retreat, she had become appalled at what she had heard herself saying. She had resolved to build a better relationship with her most difficult student and had learned things about his life that turned some of her anger to compassion. Her classroom troubles had diminished as she acted on the insight that a big part of the problem came from inside of her.

There are times, of course, when we need to confront scourges such as racism head-on. But confrontation often falls short of transformation: some people are coerced into short-lived “changes of heart,” while others cling more tightly to the errors of their ways. Janet’s transformation was deep and abiding because it came from within, made possible by a community that trusted her inner teacher and allowed her to hear its voice.

🌀 Why Do We Want to Help? 🌀

“No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.” The rule is simple, but abiding by it is hard work for people accustomed to straightening each other out as a way of life. Once when I introduced the rule at the start of a long-term circle, someone

blurred out, "Then what in heaven's name *are* we going to do with each other for the next two years? You've just excluded the only things we know how to do!"

And that, as they say, is no joke, especially for those of us in the so-called helping professions, who sometimes act as if our entire reason for being is to set other people straight. I recently facilitated a session where one participant was so certain that another's mortal soul depended on her advice—rules be damned!—that I had to ask her three times to cease and desist.

So what *do* we do in a circle of trust? We do what the people in Janet's circle did: we speak our own truth; we listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter.

This way of being together is so countercultural that it requires clear explanation, steady practice, and gentle but firm enforcement by a facilitator who can keep us from reverting to business as usual. But once we have experienced it, we want to take this way of being into other relationships, from friendship and the family to the workplace and civic life.

If we are to embrace the spirit as well as the letter of the law that governs a circle of trust, we need to understand why the habit of fixing, saving, advising, and setting each other straight has such a powerful grip on our lives. There are times, of course, when that habit is benign, when what grips us is simple compassion. You have a problem, you share it with me, and wanting to help, I offer you counsel in the hope that it will be useful. So far, so good.

But the deeper your issue goes, the less likely it is that my advice will be of any real value. I may know how to fix your car or help you write a paper, but I do not know how to salvage your failing career, repair your broken marriage, or save you from despair. My answer to your deepest difficulties merely reflects what I would do if I were you, which I am not. And even if I were your psy-

chospiritual clone, my solution would be of little use to you unless it arose from within your soul and you claimed it as your own.

In the face of our deepest questions—the kind we are invited to explore in circles of trust—our habit of advising each other reveals its shadow side. If the shadow could speak its logic, I think it would say something like this: "If you take my advice, you will surely solve your problem. If you take my advice but fail to solve your problem, you did not try hard enough. If you fail to take my advice, I did the best I could. So I am covered. No matter how things come out, I no longer need to worry about you or your vexing problem."

The shadow behind the "fixes" we offer for issues that we cannot fix is, ironically, the desire to hold each other at bay. It is a strategy for abandoning each other while appearing to be concerned. Perhaps this explains why one of the most common laments of our time is that "no one really sees me, hears me, or understands me." How can we understand another when instead of listening deeply, we rush to repair that person in order to escape further involvement? The sense of isolation and invisibility that marks so many lives—not least the lives of young people, whom we constantly try to fix—is due in part to a mode of "helping" that allows us to dismiss each other.

When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved; you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul back into the woods. So the best service I can render when you speak to me about such a struggle is to hold you faithfully in a space where you can listen to your inner teacher.

But holding you that way takes time, energy, and patience. As the minutes tick by, with no outward sign that anything is happening for you, I start feeling anxious, useless, and foolish, and I

start thinking about all the other things I have to do. Instead of keeping the space between us open for you to hear your soul, I fill it up with advice, not so much to meet your needs as to assuage my anxiety and get on with my life. Then I can disengage from you, a person with a troublesome problem, while saying to myself, "I tried to help." I walk away feeling virtuous. You are left feeling unseen and unheard.

How do we change these deeply embedded habits of fixing, saving, advising, and setting each other straight? How do we learn to be present to each other by speaking our own truth; listening to the truth of others; asking each other honest, open questions; and offering the gifts of laughter and silence? These ways of being together are so important in a circle of trust that each of them has its own chapter in this book. This chapter is devoted to learning to speak and listen; Chapter VIII, to the art of asking honest, open questions; and Chapter IX, to the clarifying and healing power of silence and laughter.

☯ Talking to Ourselves ☯

What does it mean to "speak our own truth" in a circle of trust? Of course, the question cannot be answered in terms of the content, which will vary vastly depending on who is speaking and when.

But no matter what the content may be, speaking our truth in a circle of trust always takes the same form: we speak *from* our own center *to* the center of the circle—to the receptive heart of the communal space—where what we say will be held attentively and respectfully. This way of speaking differs markedly from everyday conversations in which we speak *from* our own intellect or ego directly *to* the intellect or ego of someone on whom we hope to have an impact.

Everyday speech is "instrumental" rather than "expressive," intended to achieve a goal rather than simply to tell one's own truth. When we speak instrumentally, we try to influence the listener by informing or affirming or rebuking or making common cause. But when we speak expressively, we speak to express the truth within us, honoring the inner teacher by letting it know that we are attending to its voice. Our purpose is not to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a chance to teach us.

Of course, knowing when we are speaking from the soul rather than the intellect or ego is difficult, since the intellect and ego insist that *they* are the center of our lives and *they* speak the voice of truth! It takes time to learn to distinguish between the various voices within us and even more time to get regular access to the voice of soul. The signs that we are speaking *from* that inward center are subtle, as subtle as the stillness of a pond; the capacity to recognize them grows slowly as we speak in a space where no one is making ripples.

Though it is hard to know when we are speaking *from* our own center, it is not so hard to know when we are speaking *to* the center of the circle: expressive speaking is less stressful than its instrumental counterpart. When we speak directly to others in order to achieve a goal, we feel the anxiety that comes from trying to exercise influence. But when we speak to the center of the circle—free of the need to achieve a result—we feel energized and at peace. Now we speak with no other motive than to tell the truth, and the self-affirming feelings that accompany such speech reinforce the practice.

How we *listen* in a circle of trust is as important as how we speak. When someone speaks from his or her center to the center of the circle, the rest of us may not respond the way we normally do—with affirmations or rebuttals or some other way of trying to

influence the speaker. So we learn to take in whatever is said with as much simple receptivity as we can muster.

Receptive listening is an inward and invisible act. But in a circle of trust, it has at least three outward and visible signs:

- Allowing brief, reflective silences to fall between speakers, rather than rushing to respond—silences that honor those who speak, give everyone time to absorb what has been said, and slow things down enough so that anyone who wishes to speak can do so
- Responding to the speaker not with commentary but with honest, open questions that have no other intent than to help the speaker hear more deeply whatever he or she is saying—a demanding art that is the subject of the next chapter
- Honoring whatever truth-telling has been done by speaking one's own truth openly into the center of the circle—placing it alongside prior expressions as simple personal testimony, with no intent of affirming or negating other speakers

When people speak instrumentally, trying to get leverage on each other, it is nearly impossible to listen receptively to what another says. We listen with half a mind, at best, busily filtering what we hear so that we can embrace what we agree with and reject the rest. We listen, that is, with our egos. But when people speak expressively, we listen openly, with our souls. Now we can attend fully to whatever is being said, knowing that people are not trying to comment on us and our truth but are making an honest effort to express truths of their own.

As we grow in our ability to listen this way, we give the gift of “hearing each other into speech.”² As *our listening* becomes more open—and speakers start to trust that they are being heard by people whose only desire is to make it safe for everyone to tell the truth—*their speaking* becomes more open as well.

Like every gift given, this one returns as a gift to the giver: when we learn how to listen more deeply to others, we can listen more deeply to ourselves. This may be the most important result of the unconventional speaking and listening that go on in a circle of trust.

When our discourse is aimed at influencing other people, we dare not listen too carefully to our own words—let alone be self-critical about them—lest we start to doubt their validity, become embarrassed by their implications, or otherwise lose the leverage we seek. But as we are liberated from adversarial speaking and listening, we are much more likely to hear and reflect on things we ourselves have said. Now we have the disarming experience of being taught by our own inner teacher!

When I speak from my own center to the center of the circle—in the presence of listeners who neither affirm nor negate what I say—my words simply sit there in the space between us, in full view of everyone, including me. Now I am much more likely to have inner colloquies in which I am questioned or challenged or affirmed. They may come in the middle of a meeting, during a meal, or when I awaken at night:

- “Why did I say *that* when I don’t really believe it?”
- “I believe what I said, but I am really not sure what it means.”
- “I’ve known for a long time that what I said is true for me, but I had not understood *how* true it is until just now.”
- “As I look at the truth I spoke, I suddenly see implications for my life that I had never seen before.”

Many of us have been in settings where there are ground rules to govern speaking and listening. In therapy groups, for example, we are asked to give speakers feedback so that they can understand the emotional impact their words have on others. In

“appreciative inquiry” groups, we are asked to paraphrase what we hear speakers say to find out whether we understand what they really mean. These rules can serve good ends in their native settings, but they will undermine the integrity of a circle of trust.

Here it does not matter how listeners are affected by what the speaker says (except when someone violates the circle’s rules). Nor does it matter whether listeners understand what the speaker intended to say. In a circle of trust, the only “feedback” that counts is that which comes from within the speaker, and the only understanding that counts is the speaker’s own. All that matters here is that we hold each other in a space where the soul feels safe enough to speak its truth—and we feel safe enough to become more receptive to the implications of that truth for our lives.

What happens within us in a circle of trust takes us well beyond narcissistic self-absorption or the fruitless recycling of self-referencing thought. We have a conversation with our own souls—one that just might change our lives.

🌀 Telling Our Stories 🌀

When the space between us is made safe for the soul by truthful speaking and receptive listening, we are able to speak truth in a particularly powerful form—a form that goes deeper than our opinions, ideas, and beliefs. I mean the truth that emerges as we tell the stories of our lives. As the writer Barry Lopez has noted, truth cannot “be reduced to aphorism or formulas. It is something alive and unpronounceable. Story creates an atmosphere in which [truth] becomes discernible as a pattern.”³

Storytelling has always been at the heart of being human because it serves some of our most basic needs: passing along our traditions, confessing failings, healing wounds, engendering hope, strengthening our sense of community. But in our culture of in-

sion and evasion, this time-honored practice cannot be taken for granted. It must be supported in special settings and protected with strong ground rules.

Because our stories make us vulnerable to being fixed, exploited, dismissed, or ignored, we have learned to tell them guardedly or not at all. Neighbors, coworkers, and even family members can live side by side for years without learning much about each other’s lives. As a result, we lose something of great value, for the more we know about another’s story, the harder it is to hate or harm that person.

Instead of telling our vulnerable stories, we seek safety in abstractions, speaking to each other about our opinions, ideas, and beliefs rather than about our lives. Academic culture blesses this practice by insisting that the more abstract our speech, the more likely we are to touch the universal truths that unite us. But what happens is exactly the reverse: as our discourse becomes more abstract, the less connected we feel. There is less sense of community among intellectuals than in the most “primitive” society of storytellers.

I learned something about the connection between storytelling and community while sitting in a Quaker meeting for worship, a communal silence out of which people occasionally speak. I listened as one man grieved the recent death of his best friend, telling a moving story about an experience the two of them had shared. I did not know this man or his friend, but the story he told took me deep into my own life: it brought my own friends to mind and reminded me of how precious they are and of how important it is that I let them know of that fact.

After ten or fifteen minutes of silence, another person spoke, describing with uncanny accuracy what had happened within me as I listened to the first person speak: “We believe that we will find shared truth by going up into big ideas,” she said. “But it is only when we go down, drawing deep from the well of

personal experience, that we tap into the living water that supplies all of our lives.”

I know of dialogue groups where this principle is given an acid test. People who are at each other's throats over thorny issues like abortion or the death penalty are brought together for a facilitated weekend retreat. During their time together, they are forbidden from announcing, explaining, or defending their position on the issue at hand. Instead, they are invited to tell personal stories about the experiences that brought them to whatever position they hold, while others listen openly.

This process often creates more mutual understanding than other modes of conflict resolution—especially as people are reminded that similar experiences can lead different individuals to very different conclusions. We find common bonds in the shared details of the human journey, not in the divergent conclusions we draw from those details.

Stories are evoked in many ways in a circle of trust. Sometimes they emerge as people make spontaneous connections between the topic being discussed and events in their own lives. Sometimes the facilitator solicits stories of a particular sort: “Tell us about an experience in which you felt a deep sense of community.” And sometimes the facilitator invites people to bring stories in the form of “case studies,” structured tales of particular life moments that allow us to take a close look at our travels on the Möbius strip.

Teachers, for example, are invited to bring case studies of a good moment and a bad moment in the classroom—a moment when they knew they were “born to teach” and a moment when they “wished they had never been born”—to help them see more clearly how soul and role both come together and fall apart in the course of daily life.⁴

Our personal stories are also evoked by the third things we use to help focus a circle of trust. As we saw in Chapter VI, a story

such as “The Woodcarver” or a poem such as “Now I Become Myself” can help us learn from our experience in ways that go much deeper than simply talking about what happened. Archetypal “big stories” such as these shed light on the “little stories” of our lives, revealing meanings that we might otherwise miss.

When we tell our personal stories in a circle of trust, the ground rules prohibit people from helping us “solve” whatever problem may be embedded in those stories. But storytelling in such a circle often yields powerful “solutions” nonetheless—in the lives of those who speak *and* of those who listen.

As a speaker, especially if I talk about things I find shameful or painful, the solution may come from discovering that I can tell my story without being cast into the outer darkness. As I realize that people are receiving my self-revelation without judgment, I find myself freed to dig deeper into the root system of my issue, and the resulting self-knowledge may contain something of the solution I need.

As a listener, I may discover that someone in the circle has a problem similar to mine, and as I hear it voiced in another person's words, I gain new insight into my own dilemma. Sometimes as I hear the person explore a possible resolution to his or her problem, my own inner teacher is evoked. At the very least, knowing that someone else has a problem like mine gives me a sense of not being crazy and alone that in itself can open a path to deeper self-understanding.

A story does not need to become a puzzle with a solution or a fable with a moral in order to do its problem-solving work in our lives. Telling a story expressively, as an end in itself, can contribute powerfully to our insight, healing, and enlightenment. The philosopher Martin Buber pointed to this power in a story about a story:

A story must be told in such a way that it constitutes help in itself . . . My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to

tell a story about his teacher. And he related how [his teacher] used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness. That's how to tell a story!¹⁵

What Is Truth? ❧

The soul wants truth, not trivia. So if the space between us is to welcome the soul, it must be a space in which truth can be told. Our ability to create and protect such a space depends on how well we understand the assumptions about truth—and the way truth emerges among us—that form the foundations of a circle of trust.

These assumptions will not find favor with people who believe that there are absolute answers to the deepest questions of our lives and that those who know the answers are obliged to convert everyone else! As the ground rules of a circle of trust make clear—especially the rule that forbids fixing, saving, advising, and setting straight—the arrogance of absolutism is not welcome here.

But neither is the mindlessness of relativism. In fact, the very act of participating in a circle of trust and abiding by its disciplines takes us well beyond the silly and dangerous notion that there is “one truth for you, another truth for me, and never mind the difference.” If I believed that, I simply would not bother with this vexatious thing called “community,” where I must speak and listen in ways that might alter my understanding of what is true.

You and I may hold different conceptions of truth, but we *must* mind the difference. Whether we know it or not, like it or not, acknowledge it or not, our lives are interconnected in a complex web of causation. My understanding of truth impinges on your life, and yours impinges on mine, so the differences between

us matter to both of us. A circle of trust honors both our differences and our connections.

My working definition of truth is simple, though practicing it is anything but: “Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.”¹⁶ Truth cannot possibly be found in the conclusions of the conversation, because the conclusions keep changing. So if we want to live “in the truth,” it is not enough to live in the conclusions of the moment. We must find a way to live in the continuing conversation, with all its conflicts and complexities, while staying in close touch with our own inner teacher.

In a circle of trust, we can dwell in the truth by dwelling in the conversation. In such a circle, our differences are not ignored, but neither are they confronted in combat. Instead, they are laid out clearly and respectfully alongside each other. In such a circle, we speak and hear diverse truths in ways that keep us from ignoring each other *and* from getting into verbal shootouts—ways that allow us to grow together toward a larger, emergent truth that reveals how much we hold in common.

How does that larger truth emerge in a circle of trust, and how do we grow toward it? It happens as together we create a “tapestry of truth,” a complex fabric of experience and interpretation woven from the diverse threads of insight that each of us brings to the circle. Doing so requires a loom of corporate discipline strong enough to hold those threads in creative tension with one another—a loom provided by the principles and practices of a circle of trust.

According to conventional wisdom, we arrive at shared truth only by confronting and correcting each other in debate. But my experience suggests that we rarely change our minds and move toward mutual understanding in the heat of argument. Instead, we become separated from each other, and from the inner teacher, by our fear of losing the battle—and the energy we expend trying to

make sure that we win leaves us with no resources for reflection and transformation.

In combative situations, some people withdraw from the fray, disappearing into foxholes of private belief where the conflict cannot touch them. Others stay on the field and fight by clinging more tightly to some preexisting conviction, wielding it to fend off their foes like the familiar weapon it is. In the midst of intellectual or spiritual warfare, we rarely risk expressing those tentative probes and vulnerable ideas that might lead us to new insights but would also leave us open to attack. Confronted by “the enemy,” we become even more committed to whatever we have always believed and are less likely to embrace the challenges that might lead to new understanding.

But in a circle of trust—whose ground rules forbid us from confronting and correcting each other—a remarkable thing happens: we confront and correct ourselves! To put it more precisely, the inner teacher confronts and corrects us. In such a circle, we feel safe enough to put forth tentative and fragile insights. Here we have a chance, over time, to sit quietly with our own and other people’s thoughts—a chance to see how our insights relate to the larger pattern of the group and to determine how much of that pattern we wish to embrace as our own.

In a circle of trust, this tapestry of truth is woven continually, right before our eyes. As I watch it emerge, I see places where someone, perhaps me, contributed a thread that seems to enhance the pattern—and places where someone, perhaps me, contributed a thread that now seems discordant. Slowly, organically, my sense of true and false, right and wrong, has a chance to evolve, a fabric of life woven on the loom called a circle of trust. Truth evolves within us, between us, and around us as we participate in “the eternal conversation.”

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 RILKE¹