

Circles of Trust
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For the good [person] to realize that it is better to be whole than to be good is to enter on a strait and narrow path compared to which his [or her] previous rectitude was flowery license. —John Middleton Murry

Reading: Romans 7:15-20

We live divided lives—cut off from our souls, separated from our beliefs and convictions, denying what we know to be true, our inner true selves not integrated fully with the selves we show others.

The apostle Paul wrote about this experience of being divided when he said, “I do not understand my own actions, but I do the very thing I hate... it is no longer I (my true self) that (does) it... For I do not do the good I want.”

In Parker Palmer’s book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, he makes the point that the divided life is not so much a failure of ethics as it is a failure of human wholeness. It is not about conforming to an external code of conduct as it is being disconnected from one’s inner voice, one’s soul. There are, in fact, many people who are “righteous” that live divided lives. And there are those who embrace their own failings that experience wholeness. As John Middleton Murry wrote, “it is better to be whole than to be good.”

What does it mean to be disconnected from our souls? Palmer says that “soul” has gone by many other names, such as “the core of our humanity” or “true self.” The Quakers call it the “inner teacher” or

“inner light.” Humanists call it “identity” or “integrity.” It is that part of ourselves that *tells the truth* about ourselves and the world, that wants to *connect us to the whole*. It contains our failures, fears and sorrows as well as our gifts, hopes and visions. It is where the divine and human meet.

Palmer uses the image of the wild animal:

Like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places...

Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see the wild animal, we know the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance.

Palmer, who is in the Quaker tradition, introduces something called a “circle of trust,” which is “a group of people who know how to sit quietly ‘in the woods’ with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up.” It is a different way of being in community, because often “community” in our culture is a place that is noisy and threatening, scaring the wild soul away.

And so a circle of trust has no agenda except to help people listen to their own souls and discover their own truth. In a circle of trust there is *no advising* or *fixing each other*, rather the people hold others in a space where they can listen to their own inner teacher.

This reminds me of something that the great therapist, Carl Rogers, once said:

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.

In a circle of trust there is a particular merging of both community and solitude. It is a place, says Palmer, of “being alone together,” a “community of solitudes.” He writes,

Solitude does not necessarily means living apart from others; rather it means never living apart from one’s self...

Community does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others; rather, it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other.

We need both; it is not either-or. The paradox is that they lead to each other. True community leads to solitude, and true solitude leads to community. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Let [the person] who cannot be alone beware of community. Let [the person] who is not in community beware of being alone.

The central idea is this: Everyone already has what he or she needs for wholeness. It is hidden within us. We can’t give it to somebody, and we can’t expect somebody to provide it to us.

And so in a circle of trust, we trust two things. First we trust each other to create and keep a safe space to let the true self emerge. We trust that the others are not there to judge or to change us. Second, we trust in the power of each person’s soul. We trust that

the inner teacher can speak the truth, and that this can have profoundly transforming effects.

What does this trust look like? How does this play out? Palmer uses the term, *receptive listening*, in which there is no confronting or correcting. And something remarkable happens: the inner teacher confronts and corrects. Receptive listening honors those who speak with plenty of silence. One honors the truth-telling with one's own truth, not to affirm or negate the other, but simply to place it alongside prior expressions. And finally, one also responds not with commentary or advice but with honest, open questions. These questions are not advice in disguise, but they have the purpose of helping the speaker hear more deeply whatever he or she is saying:

An honest question is one I can ask without possibly being able to say to myself, "I know the right answer to this question, and I sure hope you give it to me" ... there is no way for me to imagine what the "right answer" might be. Your soul feels welcome to speak its truth in response to questions like these because they harbor no hidden agendas.

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

At their best, churches are like these circles of trust, where we are encouraged to sit quietly and wait for the soul to show up, where we show each other acceptance without trying to advise or fix each other, where we offer a safe space for each person to be and to

express oneself, where we honor the truth telling of others and simply place our own truth alongside others.

To boil this all down, it is all about honoring the soul. When we honor the soul, the way a circle of trust honors the soul, then miraculous healing and transformation occurs. It can be summarized by the beautiful word, “Namaste.” Namaste is a Sanskrit word that is used as a greeting and salutation in India, and it means, “I bow to the divine in you.” Ram Dass elaborates on this:

In India, when we meet and greet and we say, “Namaste,” which means, I honor the place in you where the entire Universe resides, I honor the place of love, of light, of truth, of peace. I honor the place within you where if you are in that place of you and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us.

And so one way to describe a circle of trust is when the *only* concern is Namaste. It is when our only *goal is to honor the sacred within the other.*

Now, I am not saying that we should *always* operate as if we are in a circle of trust, 24/7. There is a time and place for that level of sharing and vulnerability. Not all people share the intention of self-transformation all the time. And most of the time, we have other concerns that we have to balance in our lives. Honoring the souls of others is not always our singular goal, but it can color our lives even when we are not in our circle of trust.

There is another book by Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening and Creating New Realities.* Kahane, who was involved in South Africa’s transition away from apartheid and other high-conflict situations, says some similar things when it comes to working on social and political problems.

Now, what Kahane is saying is that to deal with problems on these large, complex levels, there needs to be “open talking” and “open listening.” That is, not just talking *at* each other or just debating, but listening and talking non-judgmentally, with empathy and, I would add, *honoring the soul and that which is sacred in the others*. It is listening with an attitude not to change or convince others, but *to be changed*. It reminds me of Gandhi’s famous saying, “Be the change you wish to see.” This involves the belief that even in our enemies or opponents there is an inner teacher!

Now, when it comes to solving social problems, I’m not saying that open talking/listening is the *only* way to find solutions. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. (This may be a weakness in Kahane’s book.) There is still a need for protests, for the prophetic word, for political pressure, for boycotts and divestments. There is even the need sometimes for force or the threat of force. Open talking/listening implies that the parties want change, but sometimes they need to be induced to want change.

So this is not the *only* way, but perhaps it is a *necessary part of social change, an essential component*. And we often overlook this vital ingredient.

Kahane shares an insight by his friend, Bill Torbert. We’ve all heard the slogan, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem. Torbert points out that this misses an important point about social change. He said the slogan should be, “If you are not part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution.”

In other words, when we open *ourselves* to change, listen to our own inner teacher, lower our own defenses and allow ourselves to be challenged and changed—then others are invited to do the same. When we bring elements of the circle of trust into the world

and honor the soul in others and ourselves, amazing things can happen. Kahane writes:

There is a story about a man who wanted to change the world. He tried as hard as he could, but really did not accomplish anything. So he thought that instead he should just try to change his country, but he had no success with that either. Then he tried to change his city and then his neighborhood, still unsuccessfully. Then he thought that he could at least change his family, but failed again. So he decided to change himself. Then a surprising thing happened. As he changed himself, his family changed too. And as his family changed, his neighborhood changed. As his neighborhood changed, his city changed. As his city changed, his country changed, and as his country changed, the world changed.

I'm convinced more and more that all healing—political, social, relational and personal—begins and ends with the soul, with being open to our own inner self, our inner teacher. Each person has what s/he needs to help heal the divided life and to embrace life and wholeness.

It begins and ends with Namaste—
that we courageously and shamelessly,
in good and bad times,
honor the divine
within others
and within ourselves.