

Meeting of the Contemplative Leadership Group

Report on a 5th Gathering of Leadership Educators with Parker Palmer at the
Harvard Graduate School of Education
March 27, 2012



On March 27, 2012 the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society co-hosted, with Jerry Murphy, Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and Pamela Seigle, Executive Director of Courage & Renewal Northeast, the fifth in a series of gatherings at Harvard University for leadership educators. Arthur Zajonc invited Parker Palmer, founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal, to share his understanding of contemplation and how it relates to leadership. Arthur recently co-authored *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (Jossey-Bass, 2010) with Parker Palmer and Megan Scribner. Members of the ongoing contemplative leadership group were invited to bring guests, and the Eliot Lyman Room at HGSE was filled near to capacity with over 50 participants.

Parker Palmer began with a few words about the Center for Courage & Renewal, the non-profit he founded, and its regional affiliate, Courage & Renewal Northeast. He also introduced "Courage in Schools," a national initiative led by Pamela Seigle, Chip Wood and Lisa Sankowski of Courage & Renewal Northeast. For over a decade, the Courage & Renewal network of two hundred facilitators have explored issues of contemplative leadership with public school teachers, non-profit leaders, physicians, clergy, engaged citizens and others through creating safe spaces or "Circles of Trust," in which to "rejoin soul and role."

He offered a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke as a focus for reflection, and to surface themes related to contemplation and leadership.

Ah, Not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.

From his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer shared his view that

a leader is a person with the power to project either shadow or light on some part of the world, and on the lives of the people who inhabit it. A leader shapes the ethos in which others must live, an ethos that can be as light-filled as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A *good* leader has high awareness of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good.

Parker spoke about the nature of contemplation (“any way you have of penetrating delusion and encountering reality”) and privilege (“anything that privileges me supports illusion”). Leadership training, he said, should begin with questioning what assumptions we are making about what is real and what is powerful.

The afternoon included silent, solitary reflection, speaking and listening in small groups, and dialogue in the larger circle. The participant discussion included these reflections:

- “If I don’t know what kind of person I am, I can’t lead others.”
- “There is the paradox of deep longing for, and fear of, being known.”
- “What I put into the world creates it while the world is creating me.”

Parker offered the “Circle of Trust Touchstones” (attached) as guidance for inner exploration and group conversation, and shared a “Movement Model” that connects inner exploration to institutional transformation. These touchstones and are used in all aspects of Courage and Renewal work and have the movement model has informed the growth of the organization from its inception. He then extended an invitation to those gathered to share the connections they found to their own approaches, and many threads of relationship were woven into the conversation.

Attachment follows: Circle of Trust Touchstones

Circle of Trust Touchstones *from Courage & Renewal*

Extend and receive welcome. People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.

Be present as fully as possible. Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.

What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand. This is not a "share or die" event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.

Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth. Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.

No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight. This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the "helping professions." But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.

Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."

When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.

Attend to your own inner teacher. We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.

Trust and learn from the silence. Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.

Observe deep confidentiality. Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.

Know that it's possible to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.