

CREATING A CIRCLE OF TRUST

I have been part of a group that functioned very much like the Circles of Trust Parker Palmer describes in *Hidden Wholeness*, whose “singular purpose is 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 her inner teacher.”

Unconditional love. . .surrounds us with a force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out—a force field that is safe enough to take the risks and endure the failures that growth requires.

Rilke writes: “Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other. We stand with simple attentiveness at the border of the other’s solitude—trusting that they have within themselves whatever resources they need and that our attentiveness can help bring those resources into play.”

A circle of trust consists of relationships that are neither invasive nor evasive. In this space, we neither invade the mystery of another’s true self nor evade another’s struggles. We stay present to each other without wavering, while stifling any impulse to fix each other up. We offer each other support in going where each needs to go, and learning that each needs to learn, at each one’s pace and depth.

In a circle of trust,

We trust the soul, its reality and power; its self-sufficiency, its capacity to speak truth, its ability to help us to listen and respond to what we hear.

We trust each other to have the intention, discipline and goodwill to create and hold a space that is safe enough to welcome the soul.

We trust the principles and practices that create such a space and safeguard the relationships within it, aware that the pull of conventional culture’s persistent and can easily tug us toward behaviors that will scare the shy soul away.

We trust that welcoming the soul with no “change agenda” in mind can have transforming outcomes for individuals and institutions.

Palmer indicates important safeguards, such as clear boundaries, open invitation to respond—no pressure to conform, no fixing, saving, advising, and ambiance of space. He also suggests there is value in “speaking from our own center to the center of the circle.”

He explains:

Everyday speech is “instrumental” rather than “expressive,” intended to achieve a goal rather than simply to tell one’s 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.

He goes on to describe the attributes of receptive listening:

—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.

An honest question is one I can ask without possibly being able to say to myself, "I know the right answer to this question."

—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.

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.