

Divided No More: Journeying Towards An Undivided Life

The life and teaching of Parker J. Palmer and its
relevance for Spiritual Direction

by

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1. Introduction:

Parker J. Palmer is a writer, teacher, and activist, who was named one of the thirty most influential senior leaders in higher education, and one of ten key “agenda-setters” of the past decade. His books have greatly affected my own life, because they offer many answers to the challenge of living a god-centred life in the twenty-first century.

Palmer’s invitation to ‘welcome the soul and weave community in a wounded world’ (Palmer, 2004, cover page) resonates with my aspirations in *Spiritual Direction*. In our present era we live with paradigms that have separated head from heart, facts from feelings, theory from practice, teaching from learning, personal from social life, and soul from role. *Spiritual direction* offers a space to explore one’s dividedness, and many other issues, in order to move towards bringing people’s inner and outer worlds back into harmony. In this assignment, I will firstly describe the life of Parker J. Palmer, in order to show the context and experiences that generated his writings. Secondly, I will summarise the main themes of some of his books, and thirdly relate these to the ministry of *Spiritual Direction*.

2. Biography – Palmer, Parker J. (1939-)

a. The Formative Years¹

Parker was born in 1939 in Chicago. He grew up in Wilmette, Illinois in a family of 5 with his dad, Max J., a business executive, his mother, La Verne, and his two sisters. His home life was alive with compelling and lively conversations. In his high school days he was known as the “best and the brightest” and as a voracious extracurricular reader with alluring attention to language. After graduating from high school he

¹ The subtitles of this biography are taken from Intrator, 2005)

majored in philosophy and sociology, and was awarded the Danforth Graduate Fellowship for academic excellence and strong religious-ethical convictions. In 1961 he married Sally Hartley and enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. However, a year later it became apparent to him that he was not meant to become an ordained leader in the church and he entered Berkeley's doctoral program in sociology at the University of California.

b. First Encounters with Vocation

Even in his twenties he was already fascinated by the themes of self and society. In 1965 after adopting their first child, Parker and Sally and their son Brent moved to Beloit College in Wisconsin where he worked as a teacher and received the "Teacher of the Year" award at age twenty-eight.

In 1967, when son Todd was born, he returned to Berkeley to complete his PhD. Sally and Parker adopted Carrie from Korea and moved to Washington to establish a community-organizing institute focused on the creative potentials of racial diversity. Parker writes of these years: 'At that point in my journey, I didn't have a conscious, reflective inner life. I didn't know much about the inner life traditions. I didn't know much about spirituality. What I had was a highly conceptualised religious belief system, which had been formed in me by some great thinkers. And I had some great exemplars of what it meant to live a life of faith. But there was nothing in my Methodist upbringing, and nothing in the theological traditions I had learned about at Carleton or Union, that was about inwardness as I now understand it' (Intrator, 2005, p. xxxv).

The moment that marked an awakening of his inner life came when he discovered Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, which introduced him to an inward and mystical kind of spirituality. The early 1970s were a time of deep searching for the Palmers. Motivated by feelings of isolation and fragmentation at work and at home, accompanied by a growing desire to create a sense of community, Parker resigned and moved with his family to Pendle Hill, a Quaker living-learning community, and soon became dean of studies there.

c. The Emerging Vocation

The eleven years at Pendle Hill were a significant time for the Palmers. They 'included a descent into a debilitating clinical depression and an ascent into vocational clarity' (Intrator, 2005, p. xxxvii). Palmer learnt to embrace the rhythm, discipline, and practices of Quakerism, and cherished his time with Henri Nouwen, who had become a colleague, mentor and friend. What he acquired in this time built the foundation for Parker's later works on: 'the importance of an integral life, the centrality of community, pedagogies of transformation, and education for non-violent change' (Intrator, 2005, p. xxxvix).

d. The Touchstone: Inwardness

The touchstone idea of Parker's work is that all human activity comes from our inwardness. Our outward work in the world is a clear projection of our inner condition. Our activities and ways in the world depend on a still, small presence inside us that Parker views as the soul whereas the Quakers call it the "inner teacher". Our soul speaks the truth about how we are with other people, our work, and ourselves.

Congruence between our inner lives and outer actions is what our soul longs for and whenever we live in defiance of this inner voice our life is divided and our spirit suffers under the burden of duplicity. What our soul yearns for is wholeness, which Parker describes as a genuine embracing of our weaknesses as well as our strengths, our shadows as well as our light.

After their time at Pendle Hill, the Palmers moved to Madison, Wisconsin where they accepted an invitation to create an adult living-learning community modelled after Pendle Hill. During this period Parker suffered under a second bout of clinical depression and their marriage after some years of struggle fell apart and led to separation and divorce. Parker then began working as an independent writer and itinerate teacher and speaker giving speeches and workshops across the USA. The publication of his books led to more speaking invitations in higher education. In 1992 Parker married Sharon Craven, who had been his editor and partner in work and became a close collaborator in the soon-to-be “Courage to Teach programme”.

e. Putting Wheels on Ideas

Parker responded to an invitation from the Fetzer Institute, which is a philanthropic foundation, concerned with the inner lives of doctors and patients, and teachers in higher education. He developed, and taught on, retreats focusing on both the role that fear plays in education, and the inner-life metaphors drawn from the four seasons (see Appendix 1).

These retreats were extremely popular. By 1996 newly trained facilitators were teaching these courses at four sites around the country and in 1997 Parker published his

most influential and widely read book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*.

f. The Self Unleashed

The essence of Parker's life and work is built on the belief that the way to "right action" starts with an inner journey. Turning inward can at first seem selfish and narcissistic, but this journey to the depths of the soul will enable us to return to the world ready to offer life-giving leadership. Without this inward journey, our lives remain divided, and dissonance between our values and beliefs and our actions renders us incomplete and ineffective.

g. The Legacy of Life Lived True

'Parker is potentially the most influential writer, thinker, and teacher in a movement devoted to reclaiming the sacred in the work of the professions (Intrator, 2005, p. lvi). His work encourages people to fight the forces that seek to automate, measure, script, and narrow our humanity and with that deplete our heart and diminish our creativity. In order to do this, he encourages us to pursue the quest for true self and explore the nature and contours of the inner life. This includes creating around us, for example through spiritual direction, a community of learning where we can explore the inner landscape of our lives; and then move towards social and institutional transformations as a result of living and leading from a place of identity, integrity, and wholeness.

3. Summary of some of Parker's writings:

- **LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK: Listening for the voice of vocation**

In this book, Palmer tells his own story of vocation, including all the questions, difficulties and dark spots he encountered along the way. With his life story Palmer encourages deep reflection and compassionate recollection of our truest calling.

Chapter 1 challenges the reader to cultivate the skill of listening. To listen well, we must pause, and listen to each other, life around us, and ourselves. As a result we will become more attentive. Listening comes before responding to questions such as: What is one called to do? What is the source of vocation? The very word vocation implies both voice and calling. Palmer states: "Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about -- quite apart from what I would like it to be about - or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions" (Palmer, 2000, p. 4).

Chapter 2 encourages further self-exploration and self-discovery and views vocation as a gift, that one must be ready to receive, rather than an achievement. Palmer describes a period of darkness and depression in his life as an important part of his pilgrimage, or "transformative journey to a sacred centre" (Cosineau, 1998).

In Chapter 3 Palmer talks about his experience of losing a job, a season in his life where "Way closed". Palmer says we must learn our limits, and stop dwelling on the past, and

beating on the closed door. Our vocation or “Way” opens before us as we ponder where we are and where we can go from here.

Chapter 4 describes Palmer’s experiences with depression. He writes, “depression demands that we reject simplistic answers, both ‘religious’ and ‘scientific,’ and learn to embrace mystery, something our culture resists. Mystery surrounds every deep experience of the human heart: the deeper we go into the heart’s darkness or its light, the closer we get to the ultimate mystery of God (Palmer, 2000, p. 60). Palmer learnt to see depression as the hand of a friend trying to press him down to ground on which it was safe to stand – the ground of his own truth, his own nature, with its complex mix of limits and gifts, liabilities and assets, darkness and light (Palmer, 2000).

In the penultimate chapter, Palmer writes about his return from depression into a world of action offering authentic leadership to causes he cared about. This leadership is not found in external arrangements, but in the human heart. Authentic leaders aim at liberating the heart, their own and others, so that its powers can liberate the world. Unlocking our heart helps us to overcome fear and cynicism, and move us to a firm grounding from where we can be leaders of our own destiny and follow our true vocation.

The last chapter uses the metaphor of the four seasons of nature to describe the cyclical nature of our being, becoming, and movement of life. Winter with its decline and death prepares the ground for growth and abundance, which Palmer believes “is created when

we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store' (Palmer, 2000, p. 107).

“Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood. ... As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks – we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. Thus, true vocation joins self and service. Frederick Buechner puts it this way: Vocation is ‘the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need’ (Buechner in Palmer, 2000, p. 16).

Relevance of this book for spiritual direction

Palmer’s life and writing mirror some of the stages of faith or spiritual growth described by Carl Jung (Individuation process), Teresa of Avila (The Interior Castle in Welch, 1982) and/or Fowler’s stages of faith (Fowler, 1981). Palmer’s time of severe depression was for him what St. John of the Cross calls a Dark night of the soul. All these stages lead to a purification of the soul, which according to Green (1977) ‘must precede a transforming encounter with God’ (p. 60). As we listen to the voice of our true self we gain more self-knowledge. Green (1977) asserts this goes hand in hand with knowledge of God. As spiritual directors, we can invite our directees to distinguish the voices around them in search for their true self, the place inside that God wants to affirm and where God dwells.

Palmer writes about the conflict that we experience when our professional life and our inner beliefs are not aligned. This is not a secular issue, but a very spiritual one.

Spiritual direction can offer a platform where that inner voice, our true self, or the divided side of self that knows the questionable aspects of our work life, the one we hush up so we can get by and make a living, can find a voice. As the spiritual director and directee both listen to the voice of God and the voice of the true self, an integration of the outer and the inner world emerges. This integration leads to more balance in the directees' emotional, mental and spiritual life and a state where their day-to-day movements and choices feel not any more separate from – or in conflict with – their beliefs, values and the core of their being.

- **A HIDDEN WHOLENESS: The journey toward an undivided life**

This book is Palmer's latest book where he weaves together the four topics that many of his previous books discuss; namely "the shape of an integral life, the meaning of community, teaching and learning for transformation, and non-violent social change" (Palmer, 2004, p. ix).

Almost everyone lives the divided life (see examples in Appendix 3) where we are out of touch with our soul – "that life-giving core of the human self, with its hunger for truth and justice, love and forgiveness" (Palmer, 2004, p. 2) that has the power to guide our lives.

In this book, Palmer firstly diagnoses the divided life with its personal and social consequences and then offers examples from stories to describe what integrity might look like. In Chapter 3, Palmer argues that we arrive at birth with a soul or true self. In his opinion, some of us ignore, defy, or alternatively embrace our inner truth, which has significant affects on the lives we lead.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of a “circle of trust”. Palmer takes a long time Quaker practice, the Clearness Committee, and reshapes it slightly to provide for everyone a “circle of trust”, which serves as a mutual support network. This “circle of trust” is not meant as an advisory committee, but rather as a platform and space inviting the practice of listening to our inner voice.

Palmer sees these “circles of trust” as a tool and a form of community that assists in rejoining soul and role. He defines a “circle of trust” as “a space between us that honours the soul” (Palmer, 2004, p. 65) and encourages us to live lives of deep integrity.

The ensuing chapters offer detailed descriptions on how to establish and practise “circles of trust” (see Appendix 4), and create spaces where our soul feels safe enough to reveal itself and make its claim on our lives. The final chapter suggests that “circles of trust” can help us walk the path of non-violence in our century and lives, as we learn to respond to the increasing violence around us with soul-honouring and life-giving ways of being in the world.

Relevance of this book for spiritual direction

The principles Palmer established for the “circle of trust” could be used as guidelines for group spiritual direction (as described by Bakke, 2002, pp. 139-148). The difference between the two could be seen as follows: Group spiritual direction, according to Bakke (2002), attracts people, who ‘express a desire and readiness for more of God. They want to sense God’s presence and enjoy a relationship with God that has a moment-by-moment aliveness’ (Bakke, 2002, p. 140). Palmer’s “circles of trust”, on the other hand,

create a space that welcomes the soul, which can be described as the seed of selfhood that contains our spiritual DNA of our uniqueness, an encoded birthright knowledge, the inner teacher, and the true self, that which is genuine and sacred. In other words, Bakke might refer to a God within and without, whilst Palmer seems to focus on the God within.

Palmer writes that ‘all of us arrive on earth with souls in perfect form, but from the moment of our birth onward, the soul or true self is assailed by deforming forces from without and within: by racism, sexism, economic injustice, and other social cancers; by jealousy, resentment, self-doubt, fear, and other demons of the inner life’ (Palmer, 2004, p. 34).

The culture we live in discourages us from paying attention to the soul, which results in us living soulless and divided lives. The antidote to this situation, in Parker’s view, is found in a strong community, because it is there that we develop a sense of true self as we exercise and fulfil our soul’s nature: giving and taking, listening and speaking, being and doing. Spiritual direction and “circles of trust” (see Appendix 4) symbolise such communities where “the powers of deformation are held at bay long enough for the soul to emerge and speak its truth” (Palmer, 2004, p. 58).

4. Conclusion

Whilst it is difficult to summarize the entire quantity of Parker's work, in my opinion, there are three strands that he focuses on. These are:

- a. 'All human activity emerges from our inwardness, for better or worse. As we work and live, we project the condition of our souls onto our relationships. Sustaining good relationships among those with whom we work and live requires self-knowledge of our inner terrain.
- b. There are pedagogies and ways of knowing that can invite and welcome the soul and heal the person' (Intrator, 2005, p. xxiv). Parker, being a teacher, invites the soul into "circles of trust" where deeper meanings and truths can be explored.
- c. 'The route to enduring social change runs through individuals who join together after making a decision to live with integrity and wholeness. Despite his affection for the monastic life, Parker is a man of action who calls on us to understand the dynamics of social movements and participate in *right action*' (Intrator, 2005, p. xxiv).

This paper described the life of Parker J. Palmer and some of his writings that emerged in response to his experiences. I believe that Palmer's contributions are significant for the formation and practice of spiritual directors. His life and teaching encourages us to liberate our true self and pursue our own journey towards a life that is "divided no more", in turn, we can encourage our directees to live into that choice.

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Appendix 1: (as summarised in Intrator, 2005, p. xlvii)

The inner-life metaphors drawn from the four seasons:

Fall: The Seed of True Self.

This retreat focuses on establishing an atmosphere of trust and openness that enables each person to uncover and touch something of his or her true self. It is a time of self-encounter, self-revelation, and self-acceptance.

Winter: Dwelling in Darkness.

This retreat focuses on the darkness and spiritual death that teachers often encounter in their work, created by such things as cynical colleagues and stagnant institutions, as well as by the deadly shadows we all carry within.

Spring: Embracing the Paradoxes.

This retreat focuses on the fact that, despite winter's death and darkness, new life and vitality are always waiting to emerge. Here teachers have a chance to perceive "the hidden wholeness" by understanding how apparent opposites can complement each other, especially those that have special relevance to teaching (for example, subjective and objective knowledge, personal and professional commitments, cognitive and affective concerns).

Summer: Abundance and Harvest.

This retreat focuses on living into the abundance of questions, ideas, and aspirations that the retreats have generated. Teachers are asked to look back on the past school year, to look ahead to the next, and to reflect on what they are learning about who they are, who they are becoming, and who they are meant to serve.

Appendix 2:

Quotations from the book LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK: LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF VOCATION (Palmer, 2000)

Chapter 1: Listening to Life

“Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live – but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life” (Palmer, 2000, p. 4).

“True self, when violated, will always resist us, sometimes at great cost, holding our lives in check until we honour its truth” (Palmer, 2000, p. 4).

ASK ME

“Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. **Ask me whether what I have done is my life.** Others have come in their slow way into my thought, and some have tried to help or to hurt: ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say. You and I can turn and look at the Silent River and wait. We know the current is there, hidden; and there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us. What the river says, that is what I say”.
(Stafford, 1998, p. 56)

Chapter 2: Now I become myself: A vision of vocation

Now I become myself.

It's taken time, many years and places.

I have been dissolved and shaken,

Worn other people's faces...

(Sarton, 1974, p. 156).

Appendix 3:

Examples of a divided life (Palmer, 2004, p. 6):

- We refuse to invest ourselves in our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve.
- We make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it.
- We remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off our spirits.
- We harbour secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of other people.
- We hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge, and change.
- We conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked.

Appendix 4: Creating Circles of Trust – some guidelines compiled from (Palmer, 2004, pp.73-87)

“I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place” (Rufus Jones).

Guidelines for a “circle of trust”:

1. **Clear limits:** Circles of trust have boundaries. They are a small circle of limited duration that is intentional about its process, about why we are together, about where we want to go, and about how we must relate to each other if we are to reach our destination.
2. **Skilled leadership:** A circle of trust needs a skilled leader, or facilitator, who is well grounded in the principles and practices necessary to create safe space for the soul. The larger the circle, the more important it is to have a designated leader. Since the purpose of a circle of trust is to help us live undivided lives the leader should be a person who models this. The facilitator’s role is to create and protect a space where everyone’s soul can feel safe.
3. **Open invitations:** Everyone’s participation is a voluntary response to an open invitation, without a hint of the manipulation or coercion that would scare off the shy soul.
4. **Common ground:** Circles of trust create common ground on which people of diverse beliefs can explore issues of the inner life. Common ground is created by framing our exploration in the metaphors of the seasons. A circle of trust that follows the cycle of the seasons can help us become gardeners of our own souls. It can teach us that life is a constant interplay between the powers within us, for which we are responsible, and the powers outside us, over which we have little control.
5. **Graceful Ambiance:** People in a circle of trust gather in settings and are guided by schedules that possess simple grace. The environment in which we meet has an impact on the quality of what happens within us and between us. The schedule for a circle of trust has as much to do with welcoming the soul as the beauty of our surroundings. Physical space and the flow of time both have an aesthetic to which the soul responds. There are three keys to creating a schedule that welcomes the soul: slow down, do more with less, and pay attention to rhythm. What follows is an example of a schedule for the first half of a daylong gathering of an ongoing circle of trust:
 - We gather at 9.00 am, starting out with 3-4 Min of silence.
 - The facilitator then invites us to take 15 Min in self-selected groups of three to check in with each other around the question “Since our last gathering, what has happened in your life that you would like others to know about?”

- The group comes together again and the facilitator hands out a poem to focus the morning's dialogue on the topic of the day. The topic is "the seed of true self," and the poem is "Love After Love" by Derek Wolcott:

*The time will come
 When, with elation,
 You will greet yourself arriving
 At your own door, in your own mirror,
 And each will smile at the other's welcome,
 And say, sit here. Eat.
 You will love again the stranger who was your self.
 Give wine, Give bread. Give back your heart
 To itself, to the stranger who has loved you
 All your life, whom you ignored
 For another, who knows you by heart.
 Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
 The photographs, the desperate notes,
 Peel your own image from the mirror.
 Sit. Feast on your life.
 (Love After Love in Wolcott, 1987)*

- The poem occupies only half a page, but it will occupy us for the next two and a half hours. The facilitator guides a communal inquiry into the poem, and the topic, by asking questions that allow us to explore with each other both the text and our own experience. This is followed by a silent break of 30 Min – a chance to reflect, take a walk, write a journal etc.
- The facilitator invites us to gather for 45 Min in self-selected groups of three. Each member of the triad is given 15 Min of focus from the other two, a chance to deepen and personalize his or her exploration of the topic.
- Finally, the facilitator invites us back to the large circle for 15 Min of sharing issues and insights that have emerged from both our solo and small-group explorations. Then we have lunch, followed by a 2-hour solitary, silent break before the circle regathers in midafternoon to take a next step.
- Instead of loading the schedule with multiple topics and lengthy texts, we have spent most of the morning focused on a single topic, framed by a brief poem. Slow down, do more with less, and pay attention to rhythm. In crafting a schedule for a circle of trust, this is what it means to walk into the woods quietly, sit at the base of a tree, and wait patiently for the shy soul to emerge and make its claim on our lives.

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