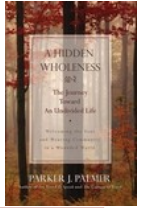


PARKER J. PALMER

# A Hidden Wholeness



~ *The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* ~

~ *Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World* ~

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

*Executive Book Summary*  
Compiled By: Caralynn A. Gidych

## Original Summary:

Palmer discusses a journey toward an undivided life through a circle of trust. He outlines the steps to listen to the soul. He teaches us how to crack open the system in order to no longer live a divided life. Palmer clearly states the steps, rules, and procedures to follow in a circle of trust. He entwines many personal stories and experiences throughout his book. Palmer accomplished his goal of welcoming the soul and weaving community in a wounded world. He shows us that living in peace and nonviolence is a possibility. He discusses the importance of silence in such a noisy world. There is a need to work together, in a community, in order to live an undivided life.

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## “Circles of Trust”



*“There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn... Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as a fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives: they make headlines because they **take so many innocents down with them**” (p. 1).*

“Wholeness is  
not about  
perfection”  
(p. 5).

“Nature uses devastation to stimulate new growth, slowly but persistently healing her own wounds” (p. 5).

*Chapter 1: Images of Integrity: Living “Divided No More”*

*Palmer explains how we are capable of living more fully.*

*Chapter 2: Across the Great Divide: Rejoining Soul and Role*

*Palmer discusses the possibility of inner wholeness.*

*Chapter 3: Explorations in True Self: Intimations of the Soul*

*Palmer explores the shyness of the soul.*

*Chapter 4: Being Alone Together: A Community of Solitudes*

*Palmer expands upon working as a group.*

*Chapter 5: Preparing for the Journey: Creating Circles of Trust*

*Palmer prepares us for the circular journey.*

*Chapter 6: The truth Told Slant: The Power of Metaphor*

*Palmer displays his perspective on losing and finding our true selves.*

*Chapter 7: Deep Speaks to Deep: Learning to Speak and Listen*

*Palmer teaches us how to listen and when to speak.*

*Chapter 8: Living the Questions: Experiments with Truth*

*Palmer walks us through the truthful questions.*

*Chapter 9: On Laughter and Silence: Not-So-Strange Bedfellows*

*Palmer listens and laughs with us (not at us).*

*Chapter 10: The Third Way: Nonviolence in Everyday Life*

*Palmer shows us a world of nonviolence.*

#### **About the Author:**

**Parker J. Palmer is a writer, teacher, poet, and activist. He focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change. His other books include *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *The Active Life*, *To Know as We Are Known*, *The Company of Strangers*, and *The Promise of Paradox*.**

**Palmer received a B.A. in philosophy and sociology from Carleton College. He spent a year at Union Theological Seminary, then went on to the University of California at Berkeley, where he studied sociology and received M.A. and Ph.D. degrees with honours. His teaching has been in universities, adult study programs, seminars, workshops, and retreats.**

#### **A Divided Life:**

- Comes in many and varied forms
- Is not a failure of ethics...it is a failure of human wholeness
- Compartmentalizing

#### **Palmer's examples of a divided life:**

- Not investing in our work, distancing ourselves
- Having jobs that violate our basic values
- Remaining in relationships that kill our spirit
- Harboring secrets for personal gain at other people's expense
- Hiding our beliefs to avoid conflict, challenge, and change
- Concealing our true identities for fear of being shunned, attacked, or criticized

- “We are cursed with the blessing of consciousness and choice, a two-edged sword that both divides us and can help us become whole. But choosing wholeness, which sounds like a good thing, turns out to be risky business, making us vulnerable in ways we would prefer to avoid” (p. 9).

**Are you living a “divided life?”**

**Community is essential to rejoining soul and role. Circles of trust are communities that know how to welcome the soul and help us hear it's voice!**

## **We must learn from our inner teacher.**

Three reasons not to do it alone:

1. The journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo: lacking support, the solitary traveler soon becomes weary or fearful and is likely to quit the road.
2. The path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company: finding our way involves clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue.
3. The destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture into the alien lands to which the inner teacher may call us.



“Every time we get in touch with the truth source we carry within, there is net moral gain for all concerned. Even if we fail to follow it’s guidance fully, we are nudged a bit further in that direction” (p. 19).

## **BEWARE:**

- “Not all circles honor the soul: some insult and invade it” (p.23).
- “We can put the chairs in a circle, but as long as they are occupied by people who have an inner hierarchy, the circle itself will have a divided life, one more form of “living within the lie”: a false community” (p.25).
- It is not easy to “distinguish the inner voice from the inner voice of fear” (p. 27). **BE STRONG!**

**“A circle of trust can form wherever two or three are gathered- as long as those two or three know how to create and protect a space for the soul” (p. 29)**

**What exactly happens in a circle of trust that supports an inner journey by making the soul feel safe?**



Functions of the soul:

1. The soul wants to keep us rooted in the ground of our own being, resisting the tendency of other faculties, like the intellect and ego, to uproot us from who we are.
2. The soul wants to keep us connected to the community in which we find life, for it understands that relationships are necessary if we are to thrive.
3. The soul wants to tell us the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two, whether that truth is easy or hard to hear.
4. The soul wants to give us life and wants us to pass that gift along, to become life-givers in a world that deals too much death.

### **SOUL LANGUAGE:**

- *Give us life*
- *Get us to pass it along*
- *Choosing to live*

**Can you hear your soul?**

“The external causes of our **moral indifference** are a fragmented mass society that leaves us isolated and afraid, an economic force that puts the rights of capital before the rights of people, and a political process that makes citizens into ciphers” (p. 37).

# Tales of the Divided Life

- Are you hiding your truth?
- Even from yourself?

*"A strong community helps people develop a sense of true self, for only in community can the self exercise and fulfill its nature: giving and taking, listening and speaking, being and doing" (p. 39).*

## OUTER OR ONSTAGE LIFE

- Image
- Influence
- Impact

## INNER OR BACKSTAGE SELF

- Ideas, intuitions, feelings, values, faith
- Mind, heart, spirit, true self, soul, or place-beyond-all-naming

## Three Consequences of the Divided Life:

- Inner light cannot illuminate work that we do in the world
- Inner darkness cannot be penetrated
- People that we are close to become wary of our onstage performance and our backstage realities

## SYMPTOMS:

Depression  
Aimlessness  
Anxiousness  
Anger  
Pain

## HAVE YOU ACKNOWLEDGED THE SYMPTOMS?



## Cracking open the system:

- Are you ready?
- When you are willing to feel the pain, and put a name to it, instead of trying to numb it, this pain will crack the closed system open.
- Then this is the decision that must be made:
 

"I want my inner truth to be the plumb line for the choices I make about my life- about the work I do and how I do it, about the relationships I enter into and how I conduct them" (p. 45).
- You are now cracked!
- This is the beginning of an amazing journey!

## The Ultimate Irony of the Divided Life

If you "live behind a wall long enough, and the true self you tried to hide from the world disappears from your own view! The wall itself and the world outside it become all that you know. Eventually, you even forget that the wall is there- and that hidden behind it is someone called YOU!" (p. 43).



Are you a divided administrator or teacher?



*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all of our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time*

T.S. Eliot

# CIRCLES OF TRUST

## Circles of Trust:

Being alone together  
Community of solitudes

## AVOID AT ALL COST:



“Presumptuous advice-giving that leaves the other feeling diminished and disrespected” (p. 52).

## TRADING SPACES

**What sort of space gives us the best chance to hear soul truth and follow it?**

A space defined by principles and practices that honor the soul’s nature and needs.

What does our space at school say to our souls?

## CIRCLE OF TRUST:

- *Has no agenda except to help people listen to their souls and discern their truth.*
- *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.*
- *“Consists of relationships that are neither invasive nor evasive” (p. 64).*

## Four things we trust in a circle of trust:

1. We trust the soul, its reality and power, its self-sufficiency, its capacity to speak truth, its ability to help us listen and respond to what we hear.
2. 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.
3. We trust the principles and practices that create such a space and safeguard the relationships within it, aware that the pull of conventional culture is persistent and can easily tug us toward behaviors that will scare the shy soul away.
4. We trust that welcoming the soul with no “change agenda” in mind can have transforming outcomes for individuals and institutions.

*“The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings” (p. 83).*

## Five features of a circle of trust:

- 1. Clear Limits: meeting dates and times, have an end point, description of circle, intention
  - 2. Skilled Leadership: well grounded in the principles and practices required to create safe soul space, authority comes only to those granted it by others
  - 3. Open Invitations: participation is a voluntary response to an open invitation, the soul knows what it needs to do, begin with silence
  - 4. Common Ground: people of diverse beliefs can explore issues of the inner life, open and focused, the soul wants hospitality and honesty
  - 5. Graceful Ambiance: the environment or space has an impact
    - Ambiance: room neither cramped nor cavernous, eye-level windows to provide visual relief, warm and inviting decor, carpet on the floor for sound absorption, and incandescent and warm lighting
- It is important to “slow down, do more with less, and pay attention to rhythm” (p. 87).

## Exploring the real issues of our lives:

- “In a circle of trust, we conduct an indirect exploration of losing and finding true self” (p. 91).
- Poetry is often used to address difficult issues indirectly
- “[Poetry] may make us...a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves.” T.S. Eliot
- Story-telling can be used as well to gain insight from other people’s similar stories

*“I may never get rid of my fear. But like Khing, I can learn to walk into it and through it whenever it rises up” (p. 105).*



### Inner Journey Questions:



- How do I guard my spirit? Do I even believe in guarding it, or have I been conditioned simply to give my spirit away?
- What fears paralyze me? Can I name them with the same liberating clarity that Khing names gain and success, praise and criticism, and bodily security?
- What practices do I have that parallel Khing’s “fasting” and “forgetting” that could help me move into and through my fears for the sake of reclaiming true self?

“ Good work is relational, and its outcomes depend on what we are able to evoke from each other” (p. 109).

*Remember-  
For the bell stand to be created,  
The tree had to be  
Cut down*

**If a tree falls in the forest, does anybody hear?**

### The Woodcarver

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand  
Of precious wood. When it was finished,  
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be  
The work of spirits.

Khing replied: “I am only a workman:  
I have no secret. There is only this:  
When I began to think about the work you commanded  
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it  
On trifles, that were not to the point.  
I fasted in order to set  
My heart at rest.

After three days fasting,  
I had forgotten gain and success.  
After five days  
I had forgotten praise or criticism.  
After seven days I had forgotten my body  
With all its limbs.

“By this time all thought of your Highness  
And of the court had faded away.  
All that might distract me from the work  
Had vanished.  
I was collected in the single thought  
Of the bell stand.

“Then I went to the forest  
To see the trees in their own natural state.  
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,  
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond  
doubt.  
All that I had to do was put forth my hand  
And begin.

“If I had not met this particular tree  
There would have been  
No bell stand at all.

“What happened?  
My own collected thought  
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;  
From this live encounter came the work  
Which you ascribe to the spirits.”

Chuang Tzu



## A SIMPLE RULE IN A CIRCLE OF TRUST:

- “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight” (p.115).

**The soul wants truth,  
not trivia.**

Receptive listening is usually an inward and invisible act. In a circle of trust there are **three signs of receptive listening that are outward and visible.**

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Honoring whatever truth-telling has been done by speaking one’s own truth openly in the center of the circle– placing it alongside prior expressions as simple personal testimony, with no intent of affirming or negating other speakers.

*“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” (p. 120).*

**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 Rilke**

*When we learn how to listen more deeply to others, we can listen more deeply to ourselves*

### Clearness Committee:

- A clearness committee is “a focused microcosm of a larger circle of trust, a setting in which we have an intense experience of what it means to gather in support of someone’s inner journey” (p. 134).
- A “focus person” is someone who has an issue that he or she is having difficulties with. This person will ask four to six people to sit on his or her clearness committee.
- Steps involved:
  1. Identify the problem as best as possible.
  2. Offer background information regarding the problem.
  3. Name the clues that lead to the problem
  4. Committee asks questions.
  5. Focus person may have the committee mirror what they have heard.
  6. Affirmations and celebrations of shared experience
  7. Follow the double confidentiality rule

- If you ask honest, open questions the soul feels welcome to speak.
- “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.”
- An open ended question: “How do you feel about the experience you just described?”
- “Why do you seem so sad?” is not an open ended question.
- (Palmer, p. 132)



- Palmer suggests choosing specific time limits for each step during the clearness committee.

*A soul is like a bird, it will fly when it is ready.*

## SILENCE AND LAUGHTER

- Shared only with trust
- Soul mates– share silence and laughter with ease
- Laughing at people is a bad thing
- Laughing with people is a good thing
- Silence at or the silent treatment is negative
- Silence which signifies reflection, contemplation, and prayer
- Silence in a circle of trust is a sign of reverence and respect. It is a vital ingredient!

People speak even if they have nothing to say.

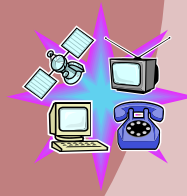
“Studies show that fifteen seconds of silence is about all the average group can bear” (p. 158).

### Can you listen to the SILENCE?

- Do not turn on the television when you get home.
- Do not listen to the radio in the car.
- Go for a walk without an MP3 or IPOD.
- Shut your cell phone off.

Can you hear it?

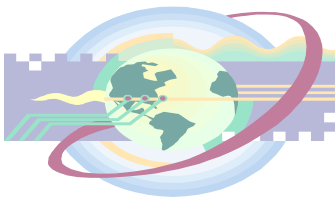
**SILENCE!!!**



### LISTEN TO YOUR SOUL!

I don't know where  
Such certainty comes from-  
The brave flesh  
Or the theater of the mind-  
But if I had to guess  
I would say that only  
What the soul is supposed to be  
Could send us forth  
With such cheer.

Mary Oliver



“I don't want to  
end up simply hav-  
ing visited this  
world.”

Mary Oliver

*Is there ever  
silence in a  
classroom?  
What about  
the children  
that need  
silence?*

“Courage comes as we understand that *no punishment* anyone might inflict on us could possibly be worse than the *punishment we inflict on ourselves by living a divided life*. The divided life ends in the sadness of never having been one's true self. But when we live “divided no more,” we always have the last laugh” (p. 164).



# Nonviolence in Everyday Life

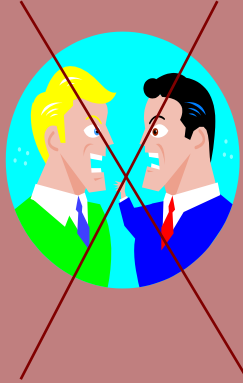
## VIOLENCE:

“By violence I mean *any way we have of violating the identity and integrity of another person.*”

*I find this definition helpful because it reveals the critical connection between violent acts large and small—*

*from dropping bombs on civilians halfway around the world to **demeaning a child in a classroom.**”*

*(p. 169)*



## NONVIOLENCE:

A commitment to act in every situation in ways that **honor the soul.**

“We act in ways that honor the soul because the **soul is worthy of honor**” (p. 172).

Take simple steps, one at a time, to honor the soul and live a life of **nonviolence.**

## BACK TO THE REAL WORLD!

*There is often a Monday morning letdown that follows an uplifting weekend retreat.*

*Get back to the real world!*

## “Divided No More”

- Return to work better able to engage it in life giving ways
- Choose a life of nonviolence
- Use practices and strategies from the circle of trust as strategies for change
- Use the community of support
- Use your inner ground to stand on
- Take your time

Here is a common example of rushing in a meeting:

“We are in a meeting where a decision must be made. As we talk, it becomes clear that people disagree on the matter, and our frustration grows as we listen to various options. Uncomfortable with holding the tension of conflicting viewpoints and wanting to “get on with it,” we call the question, take a vote, and let the majority decide what course we should take” (p. 176).

Haven’t we all lived through that type of meeting? We avoided the chance to find a better way by allowing the opposing ideas to enrich and enlarge each other’s viewpoints until a new vision emerges.

Do my disciplinary practices honour the souls of the children?

“Through those retreats, I rediscovered a generosity of heart and developed a taste for suffering” Jim stated after a two –year circle of trust experience (p. 183).

In summary:

- When we listen to another person's problems, we do not leap to fix or save: we hold the tension to give that person the space to hear his or her inner teacher. We learn to neither invade nor evade the reality of each other's lives.
- We create a form of community that is mediated by "third things." These poems and stories and works of art allow us to hold challenging issues metaphorically, where they cannot devolve to the pro-or-con choices forced on us by conventional debate.
- Our discourse never involves efforts to persuade or dissuade one another. Instead, each person speaks from his or her center to the center of the circle, where our exploration can take us to a deeper level as we hold the tension involved in weaving a "tapestry of truth."
- Truth in a circle of trust resides in neither in some immutable external authority nor in the momentary convictions of each individual. It resides between us, in the tension of the eternal conversation, where the voice of truth we think we are hearing from within can be checked and balanced by the voices of truth others think they are hearing.

*"The soul is **generous**: it takes in the needs of the world. The soul is **wise**: it suffers 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 path between realities that might defeat us and fantasies that are mere escapes. 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 powers"*  
(p. 184).

CRITICAL EVALUATION :

This book is easy to read and the ideas are easy to follow. This book has an inviting physical appearance. It is a nice size and a quick read. It would be great to read on an airplane while traveling to a warm and sunny destination!



Palmer is a well known author who has done an excellent job of showing us our hidden potential or wholeness. He does it in a step-by-step useable fashion that is good for first time readers as well as people that have used these types of circles of trust or clearness committees before. There are excellent tips for his intended audience which includes all people in all stages of their lives. The book is written in a clear and concise vocabulary. Palmer's ideas and examples are valid and well researched.

Palmer uses many real life examples, stories, and experiences that readers can associate to their lives.

I would recommend this book to anyone who feels that they need help with an issue or are living a divided life. I would also recommend Palmer's book "The Courage to Teach" to all the administrators and teachers out there!

Palmer, P. J. (2004). *A hidden wholeness: the journey toward an undivided life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.