

Introduction

A Circle of Trust provides the right group context for individual discernment to take place. Discernment is simply a process that helps us make good judgements about our own life. We live in a society where we are bombarded by ideas, and it is easy to get overwhelmed or lose our personal direction in life. A Circle of Trust holds us in a space we can make our own discernments, in our own way and time, in the encouraging and challenging presence of others' (Palmer 2024/2004:27).

To create the right group context the group is facilitated according to certain specific principles which form the group agreement. Unlike other types of groups, the focus in a Circle of Trust is on helping each person focus their attention on themselves, their soul-truth. There is an underlying belief that each human has a core that is unique to them, this is sometimes called the soul.

Palmer's work originated out of his experiences as a Quaker and his work with professionals wanting to live and work with greater personal meaning and integrity. A Circle of Trust does not presume any religious beliefs, though you may bring your own spirituality to your own process of discernment.

The Soul

The functions of the soul include:

- Keeping us rooted in the ground of our own being
- Keeping us connected to the community
- It speaks to us the truth about ourselves, our world and the relationship between the two
- It provides the raw material for discerning how we live and move in the world with meaning, integrity and authenticity

Principles of a Circle of Trust: Group Agreement

As a Circle of Trust group member, you're invited to help create a holding and protective environment where each person can feel secure enough to show up, listen to themselves, and actively respond to their own inner compass. A Circle of Trust seeks to create the experience of being both in solitude and in community. The

following principles provide an understanding of *how* to be together and *how* to take care of ourselves and each other whilst engaging in a Circle of Trust group.

We name this type of group a circle of *trust* because we are being invited to:

- 1) *trust* in the existence of our own wisdom / truth / reality / soul / true-self / inner teacher
- 2) have *trust* in one another to show up in accordance with the group principles
- 3) *trust* the underlying principles that support the special type non-violence that typifies a Circle of Trust
- 4) *trust* the aim of being alone-together, without any other agenda besides holding the space for one another to discover their inner wisdom
- 5) *trust* the participant-facilitator to help the group embody and sustain these principles

It is my job as participant-facilitator to keep the community focused and learning to relate according to the principles.

The following principles form our group agreement and are boundary markers framing and guiding our gathering.

We will aim to:

- **Embrace the gifts of silence**

Silence is a soul-gift, fertile soil that nourishes deeper self-knowledge. After someone has spoken, take a few moments to inwardly reflect and allow the silence to hold them and us.

- **Give and receive welcome**

In this Circle we support each other's reflection and learning by giving and receiving hospitality; through this the soul can show up.

- **Observe deep confidentiality**

A Circle of Trust depends on knowing that whatever we say - whether in small groups or in the large circle - will remain with the people whom we chose to share with.

- **Be respectful**

Notice when you find yourself reacting or feeling judgmental in relation to what someone shares. You might ask yourself: “I wonder what brought them to this belief?” and “I wonder how they are feeling right now?” and “I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?”.

- **Bonding**

I will bond with others knowing that the Other is myself, just in disguise. I will seek to not judge or evaluate how others feel. Seek to hold the person sharing like a small bird between two open hands.

- **Be present**

Being present for one another, setting aside preoccupations is profoundly nourishing. No fixing, saving, advising or correcting. The soul is shy and needs holding with kindness and spaciousness.

- **Use Honest, Open Questions**

Honest, open questions help the person who is speaking hear themselves more clearly.

- **Be here with your listening as well as your speaking**

You are valuable in how you receive what someone shares of themselves. Listen with your heart, mind and soul.

- **Attend to your own wisdom / truth / reality / soul / true self / inner teacher**

As we explore our deepest self by way of poems, stories, questions and silence, we have a special opportunity to pay attention to our own still small voice. Pay close attention to your own feelings, sensations, reactions and thoughts.

- **Respond by invitation (not demand)**

Do whatever your soul calls for; know that you do this with the group's full support. You are allowed to be true to yourself and sometimes this means keeping quiet and at other times this means sharing.

- **Speak your own truth**

If you decide to share what is going on for you, do so from your centre to the centre of the circle, using “I” statements. If it helps close your eyes as you keep close to your soul-truth.

You may find it useful to bring a journal, coloured pencils, etc to aid your reflection.

Asking Honest, Open Questions

The practice of asking honest, open questions invites a discernment that moves us beyond our normal patterns of thinking and communicating.

Honest, open questions create doorways into new levels of understanding; they are invitations to travel where one has not been before and see and feel things anew.

Honest, open questions are intended to help the speaker understand themselves better (rather than satisfying your curiosity or pursue your agenda). They may also help us understand the speaker more deeply.

The practice of asking honest, open questions enables us to:

- Shift the dynamic toward creating a secure enough space in which each person can access their own capacities for insight, direction and wholeness.
- Invite the individual to connect with their own wisdom and resourcefulness.
- Slow down the pace. Honest, open questions slow the pace of inquiry enabling time for deeper self-exploration and less linear meanderings.
- Support reflection, including awareness of feelings, somatic markers, as well as thoughts.
- Deepen human connection. Honest, open questions deepen the group's relational trust and felt sense of security.
- Resist jumping to solutions; assigning blame; approaching issues with a specific end in mind; teaching with a specific goal; defend what we know.
- Explore a problem, question or issue that is important for the person talking and possibly for those of us who are listening.
- Explore and hold important questions or complex explorations. This practice recognises significant value in listening without judgment; it's always a gift to be whole heartedly listened to.

Framing Open and Honest Questions

The best mark of an honest open question is that you can't anticipate the answer, nor do you have an expectation for what the answer *should* be.

Asking about feelings and somatic markers as well as facts is important. Examples are: "How do you feel about the experience you've just described?", "If you have had

a similar experience before, what did you learn from this?", "How do you feel now in your body?"

Rather than asking questions only directly related to the problem, ask questions directed to the person as well. For example, "What do you want to give yourself?" Use images or metaphors that might engage a person's imagination. For example: "If you were writing a book about this experience, what might your book title be or this chapter?"

Stay with the person's language; use words the person is using. Examples are: "You said this is an 'impossible situation'. What does this mean to you?". "What does feeling "frustrated" look like for you?" (Contrast: "Don't you ever feel angry?")

Formulate questions that are brief and to the point. For example: "What do you want or need?"

Listen deeply to the person's story, allow questions to come from your head-in-your-heart.

An honest, open question tends to begin with how, when, where, and what questions. They are questions that open the inquiry, inviting focus on the relationships among the issues.

'Why' questions tend to infer a judgment. For example: "Why did you go outside in the rain?" is best reframed as "What does walking in the rain give you?"

Yes and no, right and wrong questions tend to close-down inquiry. Examples are: "Don't you think it would be helpful to talk to her?" gets reframed to "What has been most helpful in this situation?"

Resources and further reading:

Parker J. Palmer (2024, 20th anniversary edition; first published 2004). *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Towards an Undivided Life*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco. In this book, the practice of Circles of Trust is explained and described in more detail.

For other books by Parker J. Palmer and published resources relating to Circles of Trust, see: <https://courageousrenewal.org/resource-types/book/>

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The Center for Courage & Renewal website gives more details about the values, principles and practices of this work: <https://courage-renewal.org/courage-renewal-approach/>