

The Clearness Committee A Communal Approach to Discernment

Parker J. Palmer is a writer, teacher, and activist who works independently on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change. He travels widely giving lectures, workshops, and retreats. His books include *The Courage to Teach*, *Let Your Life Speak*, *To Know As We Are Known*, and *The Active Life*. He serves as Senior Associate of the American Association of Higher Education, and in 1994 was given the national award for "Outstanding Contributions to Higher Education" by the Council of Independent Colleges. Dr. Palmer is Senior Advisor to the Fetzer Institute and helps direct its Teacher Formation Program. He received his Ph. D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, and he now lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

In this piece Palmer details a process for strengthening our ability for genuine inquiry. Many of us face a series of difficult dilemmas when we are trying to deal with a personal problem, question, or decision. On the one hand, we know that the issue is ours alone to resolve and that we have the inner resources to resolve it—but those resources are often hidden from us by layers of inner "stuff." On the other hand, we know that other people might help us discover our resources and find our way—but by exposing our problem to others we run the risk of being "invaded" by their judgments and assumptions and advice, a common and painful experience. As a result, we too often privatize these vital questions in our lives. At the very moment when we need all the resources we can get, we find ourselves cut off our own resources and from the resources of community.

For people who experienced these dilemmas, I want to describe an approach invented by the Quaker community, an approach that protects individual identity and integrity while drawing upon the resources of other people. It is called a "Clearness Committee."

If the name sounds like it is from the sixties, it is—the 1660's! From their beginnings over three hundred years ago, Quakers needed a way to draw on both inner and communal resources to deal with personal problems because they had no clerical leaders to "solve" their problems for them. The Clearness Committee is testimony to the fact that there are no external authorities on life's deepest issues, neither clergy nor therapists nor scholars; there is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard.

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: each of us has an inner teacher, a voice truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems. But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not give advice or "fix" people from the outside in, but to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. If we do not believe in the reality of inner wisdom, the Clearness Committee can become an opportunity for manipulation. But if we respect

the power of the inner teacher, the Clearness Committee can be a remarkable method for helping someone name and dawn his or her deepest truth.

The work of a Clearness Committee is guided by some simple but crucial rules and understandings. Primary among them, of course, is that the process is totally confidential. When the process is over, committee members will not speak with others about what happened — and they will not speak with the focus person about the problem unless he or she requests a conversation.

Normally, the person who seeks clearness (the "focus person") chooses his committee—a minimum of five and a maximum of six trusted people, with as much diversity among them as possible in age, background, gender, etc..

The focus person writes up his or her issue in 4-6 pages and sends this document to members of the committee in advance of the meeting. There are three sections to this write-up: a concise statement of the problem, a recounting of relevant background factors that may bear on the problem, and an exploration of any hunches the focus person may have about what's on the horizon regarding the problem. Most people find that by writing a statement of this sort, they are taking their first step toward inner clearness.

The committee meets for three hours with a break in the middle—and with the understanding that there may be a need for a second or third meeting at a later date. A clerk (facilitator) and a recording clerk (secretary) should be named, though taping the meeting is a good alternative to the latter. The clerk opens the meeting with a reminder of the rules, closes the meeting on time, and serves as monitor all along the way, making sure that the rules are followed with care. The recording clerk gives his or her notes to the focus person when the meeting is over.

The meeting begins with the clerk calling for a time of centering silence, inviting the focus person to break the silence, when ready, with a brief oral summary of the issue at hand. Then the committee members may speak—but everything they say is governed by one rule. It is a simple, and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions. This simple rule has astonishing implications since it prohibits us from dealing with each other's problems in the manner to which we are accustomed! The rule means: absolutely no advice; no "Why don't you...?"; no, "That happened to (or my uncle) once, and here's what I (he) did..."; no, "I know a book/therapist/exercise/diet questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to his or her inner truth without being burdened by the personal agendas of committee members. I may think I know the answer to your problem, and, on rare occasions, I may be right. But my answer is of absolutely no value to you. The only answer that counts is one that arises from your own inner truth. The simple discipline of the Clearness Committee is to give you greater access to that truth—and to keep the rest of us from defiling it "that would help you a lot" Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions.

What is an honest, open question? It is important to reflect on this, since we are so accustomed to asking questions that are advice in disguise: "Have you ever thought that it might be your mother's fault?" The best single mark of an honest, open question is that the questioner could not possibly know the answer to it "Did you ever feel like this before?" There are some other person's needs rather than at satisfying your curiosity. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with background considerations and rationale (which make the question into a speech). Trust your intuition in asking questions, even if your instinct in asking questions, even if your instinct seems off the wall: "What color is your present job, and what color is the one you-have been offered?" If a committee member asks questions that are not honest and open, other members should feel free to remind that person of the ground rules.

Normally, the focus person responds to the questions as they are asked, in the presence of the group, and those responses generate more, and deeper, questions. Though the responses should be full, they should not be terribly long—resist the temptation to tell your life story in response to every question! It is important that there be time for more and more questions and responses, thus deepening the process for everyone. The more often a focus person is willing to answer aloud, the more material he or she, and the committee, will have to work with. But this should never happen at the expense of the focus person's need to protect vulnerable feelings or to the limits of the process. So the second major rule of the Clearness Committee is this: it is always the focus person's right not to answer a question. The unanswered question is not necessarily lost—indeed, it may be the question that is so important that it keeps working on the focus person long after the Clearness Committee has ended.

The pacing of the questioning, and answering, is critical. It should be relaxed, gentle, humane. The Clearness Committee is not a cross-examination. A machine-gun fire of questions makes reflection impossible and leaves the focus person feeling invaded rather than evoked. Do not be afraid of silence in the group—trust it and treasure it. When silence falls it does not mean that nothing is happening or that the process has broken down. It may well mean that the most important thing of all is happening--new insights are emerging from within people, from their deepest sources of guidance from beginning to end of the Clearness Committee, it is important that everyone work hard to remain totally attentive to the focus person and his or her needs. This means suspending the normal rules of sodal gathering—no chit-chat, no responding to other people's questions or to the focus person's answers, no joking to break the tension, no noisy and nervous laughter to indicate that we "get it." We are simply to surround the focus person with quiet, loving space, resisting even the temptation to comfort or reassure or encourage this person, but simply being present to him or her with our attention and our questions and our care.

The Clearness Committee should run for the full time allotted. Don't end early for fear that the group has "run out of questions" —patient wailing will be rewarded with deeper questions than have 'yet been asked. About 30 minutes before the end of the meeting, the clerk should ask the focus person if he or she wants to suspend the "questions only"

rule and invite committee members to mirror back what they have heard the focus person saying. If the focus person says no, the questions continue, but if he or she says yes, mirroring can begin, along with more questions. "Mirroring" does not provide an excuse to give advice or "fix" the person — that sort of invasiveness is still prohibited. Mirroring simply means reflecting back the focus person's own words and behavior to see if he or she recognizes the image—and with each mirroring the focus person should have a chance to say, "Yes, that's me. . .," or, "No, that's not...." In the final 10 minutes of the meeting, the clerk should invited members to celebrate and affirm the focus person and his or her strengths. This is an important time, since the focus person has just spent a couple of hours feeling vulnerable. And there is always much to celebrate, for in the course of a Clearness Committee people reveal the gifts and graces that characterize human beings at their deepest and best.

Remember, the Clearness Committee is not intended to "fix" the focus person, so there should be no sense of let down if the focus person does not have his or her problems "solved" when the process ends. In truth, a good clearness process does not end—it keeps working within the focus person long after the meeting is over. The rest of us need simply to keep holding that person in the light, trusting the wisdom of his or her inner teacher.

The Clearness Committee is not a cure-all. It is not for extremely fragile people or for extremely delicate problems. But for the right person, with the right issue, it is a powerful way to rally the strength of community around a struggling soul, to draw deeply from the wisdom within all of us. It teaches us to abandon the pretense that we know what is best for another person and instead to ask those honest and open questions that can help that person find his or her own answers. It teaches us to give up the arrogant assumption that we are obliged to "save" each other and learn, through simple listening, to create the condition. that allow a person to find their own wholeness within. If the spiritual discipline behind the Clearness Committee is understood and practiced, the process can become a way to renew community in our individualistic times, a way to free people from their isolation without threatening their integrity, a way to counteract the excesses of technique in caring, a way to open new channels for the spirit to move among us with healing and power.

Modifications for Retreats

When we practice the Clearness Committee process at a retreat, several of the preceding guidelines are modified given the brevity of the time available and the need to give all participants an experience as members of a committee:

...At a retreat, I will assign members to committees, but before doing so, I will ask each focus person for a confidential list of any persons he or she especially wants to work with—or feels unable to work with.

- At a retreat, focus persons are not required to write a lengthy statement, but are asked to reflect on the three areas (see #2, above) so they can present them orally to the committee at the start of the sessions in a concise but helpful way.
- At a retreat, meetings normally last only 2 to 2.5 hours, and the "clerking" is done by everyone involved rather than a specially appointed member. Committee members who do not find it distracting to take notes during the process can make a gift to the focus person by giving him or her those notes when the meeting is over.