

## Circles of Trust, Circles of Transformation

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2; Luke 9:28-36

Sunday, March 3, 2019 — Transfiguration Sunday

Knox-Metropolitan United Church — Regina, SK — Treaty 4 Territory

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It is no accident that all of the world's wisdom traditions address themselves to the fact of fear, for all of them originated in the human struggle to overcome this ancient enemy. And all of these traditions, despite their great diversity, unite in one exhortation to those who walk in their ways: "Be not afraid."

As one who is no stranger to fear, I have had to read those words with care so as not to twist them into a discouraging counsel of perfection. "Be not afraid" does not mean we cannot have fear. Everyone has fear, and people who embrace the call to leadership often find fear abounding. Instead, the words say we do not need to be the fear we have. We do not have to lead [live, or love] from a place of fear, thus engendering a world in which fear is multiplied.

We have places of fear inside of us, but we have other places as well —places with names like trust, and hope, and faith. We can choose to [live] from one of those places, to stand on ground that is not riddled with the fault lines of fear, to move toward others from a place of promise instead of anxiety. As we stand in one of those places, fear may remain close at hand and our spirits may still tremble. But now we stand on ground that will support us, ground from which we can lead others toward a more trustworthy, more hopeful, more faithful way of being in the world.<sup>1</sup>

This is the final reflection in a series entitled ***Mapping the Constellation of the Inner Life & Building a Cosmos of Resilience***, which has drawn on the work of Parker Palmer, a Quaker Theologian and author. I have spoken

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<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* pg. 94

more about Palmer and the Quaker Tradition within Christianity in other parts which can be found on our website.

Throughout these reflections we have sought to explore what is meant by the inner life — to do some mapping, to name what we find therein and what might help us navigate inner journey. We have named that within there is a hidden wholeness and sureness, that it is not always easy to bring our inner wholeness into our outer lives, and that the need to face personal shadow, failure, limitation, and short-coming lest we project these onto others.

This week, we end by exploring the paradox of the need for outer community to accompany us on inner journey.

I wonder what these terms inner life or journey mean to you?

I wonder whether these terms bring to mind good feelings, a drive to engage?

I wonder if they feel uncomfortable?

I wonder if they feel irrelevant?

Palmer's words with which I opened this reflection, suggestion, gently, but provocatively that perhaps fear plays a greater role in our lives than we may assume — fear of failure, unconscious sense of competition, or feelings of scarcity.

Our frequent failure as leaders to deal with our inner lives leaves too many individuals and institutions in the dark. From the family to the corporation to the body politic, we are in trouble partly because of the shadows I have named. Since we can't get out of it, we must get into it—by helping each other explore our inner lives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Let Your life Speak* pg. 91

While Palmer uses the term leader here, he does not only mean people who hold a formal or informal role although it is particularly pertinent in these cases — but working from the understanding of interconnectedness within community, that we all therefore have an effect on other individuals and the groups in which we find ourselves connected.

...we could lift up the value of “inner work.” That phrase should become commonplace in families, schools, and religious institutions, at least, helping us to understand that inner work is as real as outer work and involves skills one can develop, skills like journaling, reflective reading, spiritual friendship, meditation, and prayer. We can teach our children something that their parents did not always know: if people skimp on their inner work, their outer work will suffer as well.<sup>3</sup>

I remember in High School, doing a school project on religion, thinking about the term ‘practicing Christian’ and thinking that I was so darn clever when I (having not long before this begun attending an evangelical youth group) proposed ‘why practice Christianity when you could do it for real?’

I wonder though about how often we in churches today *practice* our Tradition?

How much emphasis do we place on building habits of introspection, compassion, wisdom, stillness from which to live an embodiment of the values we find therein?

I certainly do not believe that people who are Christian or church-goers are better than anyone else — but are we kinder, versions of ourselves, able to live lives of greater beauty and connectedness than we would otherwise?

Every year, the Christian Church in the west marks the Feast of the Transfiguration on the final Sunday before the Season of Lent begins — and so reads a version of the story we heard today.

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<sup>3</sup> *Let Your life Speak* pg. 91

Jesus invites Peter, James and John to come with him to a mountain top, and there, praying he begins to shine — the theological idea being is that which is always present though unseen with him is physically manifest and visible.

As communities, we who read and ponder these words have decisions to make about what meaning we will give this story.

Shall we view this as evidence of Jesus' singularity and superiority?

Shall we view this as revealing the true nature of all beings, that just as Jesus displayed a luminosity that pointed towards a glory always present but not always evident, might we be invited to recognize the same in others?

Both have deep yet distinct implications!

Preparing for this story this year, I have been pondering the centrality of community — how this moment is presented not as a personal landmark (in contrast with Jesus' journey into the desert which we read next week at the outset of the Season of Lent) but one shared both with Jesus' friends, and also ancestors.

Incidentally, one might note that the figures that appear with Jesus in this story — Moses and Elijah — are reflective of a term that appears throughout the book of Luke in which Jesus will speak of his own ministry always by inviting his listeners to remember the story of "Moses and the Prophets" — an excellent reminder that Jesus in Luke is not creating a new faith system in opposition to Judaism, but is deeply rooting himself in conversation with that Tradition.

Quakers, who as I have mentioned worship in silence, which feels like a deeply individual act, one of solitude, manage to hold what Palmer describes as:

a paradox—the paradox of having relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness. We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul, that avoid the unconscious violence we do when we try to save each other, that evoke our capacity to hold another life in ways that honor its mystery, never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.

It is possible for people to be together that way, though it may be hard to see evidence of that fact in everyday life. My evidence comes in part from my journey through clinical depression, from the healing I experienced as a few people found ways to be present me without violating my soul’s integrity. Because they were not driven by their own fears, the fears that lead us either to “fix” or abandon each other, they provided me with a lifeline to the human race. That lifeline constituted the most profound form of leadership I can imagine—leading a suffering person back to life from a living death.<sup>4</sup>

While Palmer refers to this in relation here to his own suffering of depression — given Christianity’s sometimes reluctance to speak about Mental Health, I should note, that while here Palmer speaks about finding healing in the help of others, in other places he writes extensively about the role that professional therapy and medication, and how his journey with depression was not a one-time affair that was fixed once and for all, but something he has experienced many times in his life, even in the midst of practicing habits that he invites in his teachings.

Palmer also speaks about the Quaker practice of a clearness committee in which one person brings:

...a personal issue to a small group of people who are prohibited from giving you “fixes” or advice, but who, for three hours, pose honest, open questions to help you discover your inner truth. Communal processes of this sort are supportive but not invasive. They help us probe questions and possibilities but forbid us from rendering

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<sup>4</sup> *Let Your Life Speak* pg. 92-93.

judgment, allowing us to serve as midwives to a birth of consciousness that can only come from within.<sup>5</sup>

I think that the story of the Transfiguration can be a beautiful, invitational image of this sort of community practice.

I wonder if your experiences of church have felt like this? Supportive without being invasive, non-coercive, honouring of your own mystery, convinced of your radiance, from which consciousness and wisdom from within might emerge?

How might churches become such spaces?

Perhaps as churches ponder our role in a changing society we might come to understand ourselves not as containers of truth to be conveyed, but curators of space wherein travellers on a journey might find clearness to make the next faithful step.

The stories, songs, practices and rituals of our Tradition then become gifts to share to nurture this inner work — to reflect back to people their inner radiance, to offer companionship to find their hidden wholeness.

Less lecture hall and more practice space.

Less secret society and more community of practice.

Is this what an Epiphany shaped church looks like? A circle of trust? A circle of transformation?

A space for transfiguration?

In life. In death. In life beyond death. God is with us. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>5</sup> *Let Your Life Speak* pg. 92