

Porter Palmer
A Hidden Wholeness
CHAPTER IV



Being Alone Together
A Community of Solitudes

*Our disasters come from letting nothing live for itself,
from the longing we have to pull everything, even
friends, into ourselves, and let nothing alone.*

—ROBERT BLY¹

On Letting Things Alone

If we want to create spaces that are safe for the soul, we need to understand why the soul so rarely shows up in everyday life. The poet Robert Bly offers one explanation: it is our powerful ego drive "to pull everything . . . into ourselves" and let "nothing live for itself."

Behind that drive is our disbelief in the reality and power of the inner teacher. Convinced that people lack inner guidance and wishing to "help" them, we feel obliged to tell others what we think they need to know and how we think they ought to live. Countless disasters originate here—between parents and children, teachers and students, supervisors and employees—originate, that is, in presumptuous advice-giving that leaves the other feeling diminished and disrespected.

But we can learn a more creative way to be present to each other, as the following story shows. It is the story of a conflicted person who was transformed because the people around her chose to trust her inner teacher, overcoming their longtime habit of pulling everything into themselves.

It happened in a long-term circle of trust I facilitated for public school teachers. One of them, Linda, was a woman at the end of her rope. After fifteen years of teaching, she had nothing good to say about her supervisors, her colleagues, or her students—all of them, by her account, were misguided and sometimes malevolent. She felt certain that she would be a happier person and a better teacher if only she could replace all these annoying aliens with actual human beings.

The teachers who sat with Linda listened to her receptively and respectfully. Occasionally, they asked an honest, open ques-

tion to help her say, and hear, more deeply what was troubling her. But guided by the ground rules of this form of community (which are explored later in this book), they offered no commentary, no argument, and no advice.

Instead, they held her in a space where Linda was compelled to listen to herself. This turned out to be a revolutionary experience for someone whose cynical view of humanity had continually been reinforced by the people to whom she complained. I do not mean the few who agreed with her. I mean those who told her she was wrong and tried to talk her out of her cynicism, as well as those who turned their backs in disgust and walked away. See, Linda would say to herself, I was right about people. No one gets it, and no one cares. Like most of us, Linda knew how to use rejection to reinforce her view of the world.

I learned how revolutionary it had been for Linda to listen to herself when she told me, after several retreats, that she intended to drop out. "It's not that I don't appreciate the group," she said. "In fact, being here has helped me understand that I don't belong in teaching anymore. The problem is not my students and colleagues; they're decent people doing the best they can. The problem is me. I've burned out on teaching, and I'm harming myself as well as others by sticking with it. I've decided to quit at the end of this year and find a different kind of job. So I guess I shouldn't be taking up space in this circle anymore."

In fact, Linda had made courageous use of her space in the circle. She had seen her shadow, stopped projecting it onto others, come to grips with her own reality, and taken a step toward wholeness. I told her she was welcome to stay.

A circle of trust, I said, has no agenda except to help people listen to their own souls and discern their own truth. Its purpose is not to help people recommit to a particular role or even become better at it, though one or both may happen. The fact that Linda had seen her shadow and now felt led to leave teaching was no less

to listen to our own souls

important than the vocational renewal that was happening for others in the group.

Linda stayed and continued to make good use of this community. She emerged more fully from her shadow, grieved the loss of her longtime calling, and found clues to a new vocational path that fit her gifts. She was able to listen to herself because she was with people who knew how to let her alone without abandoning her—let her be alone, that is, with her inner teacher.

✂ Solitude and Community ✂ ↓ several definitions

As the story of Linda suggests, a circle of trust is community in a different key. Community, an elusive word with many shades of meaning, sometimes points to a group of people with a shared commitment to making an external impact of some sort, from changing one another to changing the world.

But a circle of trust has no such agenda. Though people's lives may be changed in such a circle—and that, in turn, may change the world a bit—the circle itself is focused on inward and invisible powers. Its singular purpose is to support the inner journey of each person in the group, to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth, to help each person listen to his or her inner teacher. c e

(2) In a circle of trust, we practice the paradox of "being alone together," of being present to one another as a "community of solitudes." Those phrases sound like contradictions because we think of solitude and community as either-or. But solitude and community, rightly understood, go together as both-and. To understand true self—which knows *who* we are in our inwardness and *whose* we are in the larger world—we need both the interior intimacy that comes with solitude and the otherness that comes with community.²

Paradox
of
being
alone
together

holding together
solitude &
community

When we split solitude and community into an either-or and act as if we can get along with only one or the other, we put ourselves in spiritual peril. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us about this risk in his classic *Life Together*: "Let [the person] who cannot be alone beware of community. Let [the person] who is not in community beware of being alone."³

Bonhoeffer's warning is based on two simple truths. We have much to learn from within, but it is easy to get lost in the labyrinth of the inner life. We have much to learn from others, but it is easy to get lost in the confusion of the crowd. So we need solitude and community simultaneously: what we learn in one mode can check and balance what we learn in the other. Together, they make us whole, like breathing in and breathing out.

But exactly *how* solitude and community go together turns out to be trickier than breathing. When we say we are in solitude, we often bring other people with us: think of how often our "solitude" is interrupted by an interior conversation with someone who is not there! When we say we are in community, we often lose track of true self: think of how easily we can forget who we are when we get entangled in group dynamics. how?

If we are to hold solitude and community together as a true paradox, we need to deepen our understanding of both poles. *Solitude* does not necessarily mean living apart from others; rather, it means never living apart from one's self. It is not about the absence of other people—it is about being fully present to ourselves, whether or not we are with others. *Community* does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others; rather, it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other. It is not about the presence of other people—it is about being fully open to the reality of relationship, whether or not we are alone. =

When we understand solitude and community in these ways, we also understand what it means to create a circle of trust—a space

"creating a space
between us"

between us that is hospitable to the soul, a community of solitudes where we can be alone together.

If the idea of "creating a space between-us" sounds exotic or bizarre, consider the fact that we do it all the time. Whenever people come together, in numbers large or small, we create different kinds of spaces to support different purposes:

Other
kinds
of
spaces

- We know how to create spaces that invite the *intellect* to show up, analyzing reality, parsing logic and arguing its case: such spaces can be found, for example, in universities.
- We know how to create spaces that invite the *emotions* into play, reacting to injury, expressing anger and celebrating joy: they can be found in therapy groups.
- We know how to create spaces that invite the *will* to emerge, consolidating energy and effort on behalf of a shared goal: they can be found in task forces and committees.
- We certainly know how to create spaces that invite the *ego* to put in an appearance, polishing its image, protecting its turf and demanding its rights: they can be found wherever we go!
- But we know very little about creating spaces that invite the *soul* to make itself known. Apart from the natural world, such spaces are hard to find—and we seem to place little value on preserving the soul spaces in nature.

I am not suggesting that the intellect, emotions, will, and ego are irrelevant to inner work. Operating independently, these faculties will not take us where the soul wants to go. But they are all vital parts of being human, and—with guidance from the soul—they can all become vital allies on the journey toward an undivided life.

When the soul speaks through the intellect, we learn to think "with the mind descended into the heart."⁴ When it speaks through the emotions, our feelings are more likely to nurture rela-

hospitable
in original
sin 57-58

tionships. When it speaks through the will, our willpower can be harnessed for the common good. When it speaks through the ego, we gain a sense of self that gives us the courage to speak truth to power. Every human faculty, as it becomes more soulful, can help us negotiate the complex terrain of life on the Möbius strip.

The Soul Is Shy

Spaces designed to welcome the soul and support the inner journey are rare. But the principles and practices that shape such spaces are neither new nor untested.

Some are embedded in monastic tradition, for the monastery is the archetypal "community of solitudes." Some emerged over four hundred years of Quaker faith and practice. Some were revived in the transpersonal psychology movement of the mid-twentieth century. And some are embodied in the processes of spiritual formation that can be found at the heart of most of the world's great wisdom traditions.

Formation may be the best name for what happens in a circle of trust, because the word refers, historically, to soul work done in community. But a quick disclaimer is in order, since *formation* sometimes means a process quite contrary to the one described in this book—a process in which the pressure of orthodox doctrine, sacred text, and institutional authority is applied to the misshapen soul in order to conform it to the shape dictated by some theology. This approach is rooted in the idea that we are born with souls deformed by sin, and our situation is hopeless until the authorities "form" us properly.

But all of that is turned upside down by the principles of a circle of trust: I applaud the theologian who said that "the idea of humans being born alienated from the Creator would seem an abominable concept."⁵ Here formation flows from the belief that

Some
of
soul
spaces

formation
as
inductive
method

his
take on
original
sin

Soul = like a wild animal
language we use here sounds like but
self-diff.
A Hidden Wholeness

we are born with souls in perfect form. As time goes on, we are subject to powers of deformation, from within as well as without, that twist us into shapes alien to the shape of the soul. But the soul never loses its original form and never stops calling us back to our birthright integrity.

In a circle of trust, the powers of deformation are held at bay long enough for the soul to emerge and speak its truth. Here we are not required to conform ourselves to some external template. Instead, we are invited to conform our lives to the shape of our own souls. In a circle of trust, we can grow our selfhood like a plant—from the potential within the seed of the soul, in ground made fertile by the quality of our relationships, toward the light of our own wholeness—trusting the soul to know its own shape better than any external authority possibly can.

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 is that nature, and what are those needs? My answer draws on the only metaphor I know that reflects the soul's essence while honoring its mystery: the soul is like a wild animal. his characteristics sound like but

Like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. I learned about these qualities during my bouts with depression. In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul.

Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods

yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye—but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.

Unfortunately, *community* in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away. In spaces ranging from congregations to classrooms, we preach and teach, assert and argue, claim and proclaim, admonish and advise, and generally behave in ways that drive everything original and wild into hiding. Under these conditions, the intellect, emotions, will, and ego may emerge, but not the soul: we scare off all the soulful things, like respectful relationships, goodwill, and hope.

A circle of trust 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. The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient; they are not confrontational but compassionate; they are filled not with expectations and demands but with abiding faith in the reality of the inner teacher and in each person's capacity to learn from it. The poet Rumi captures the essence of this way of being together: "A circle of lovely, quiet people / becomes the ring on my finger."⁶

Few of us have experienced large-scale communities that possess these qualities, but we may have had one-on-one relationships that do. By reflecting on the dynamics of these small-scale circles of trust, we can sharpen our sense of what a larger community of solitudes might look like—and remind ourselves that two people who create safe space for the soul can support each other's inner journey.

Think, for example, about someone who helped you grow toward true self. When I think about such a person, it is my father

community that hinders us

how others help us grow into true self-

who first comes to mind. Though he was himself a hardworking and successful businessman, he did not press me toward goals that were his rather than mine. Instead, he made space for me to grow into my own selfhood. Throughout high school, I got mediocre grades—every one of which I earned—although I always did quite well on standardized intelligence tests. I look back with amazement on the fact that not once did my father demand that I “live up to my potential.” He trusted that if I had a gift for academic life, it would flower in its own time, as it did when I went to college.

• regard
• unconditional
• love

The people who help us grow toward true self offer unconditional love, neither judging us to be deficient nor trying to force us to change but accepting us exactly as we are. And yet this unconditional love does not lead us to rest on our laurels. Instead, it surrounds us with a charged force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out—a force field that is safe enough to take the risks and endure the failures that growth requires.

• elements

That is not only what my father did for me; it is an element in every such story I have ever heard. We grow toward true self in a space where our growth is not driven by external demands but drawn forward, by love, into our own best possibilities.

Here is one way to understand the relationships in a circle of trust: they combine unconditional love, or regard, with hopeful expectancy, creating a space that both safeguards and encourages the inner journey. In such a space, we are freed to hear our own truth, touch what brings us joy, become self-critical about our faults, and take risky steps toward change—knowing that we will be accepted no matter what the outcome.

There is another one-on-one relationship that reveals, in microcosm, how we are called to relate to each other in a circle of trust. I am thinking of the experience some of us have had at the bedside of a dying person, “accompanying” someone who is making the most solitary journey of all.

What we learn from the best of the dying.

When we sit with a dying person, we gain two critical insights into what it means to “be alone together.” First, we realize that we must abandon the arrogance that often distorts our relationships—the arrogance of believing that we have the answer to the other person’s problem. When we sit with a dying person, we understand that what is before us is not a “problem to be solved” but a mystery to be honored. As we find a way to stand respectfully on the edge of that mystery, we start to see that all of our relationships would be deepened if we could play the fixer role less frequently.

①

Second, when we sit with a dying person, we realize that we must overcome the fear that often distorts our relationships—the fear that causes us to turn away when the other reveals something too vexing, painful, or ugly to bear. Death may be all of this and more. And yet we hold the dying person in our gaze, our hearts, our prayers, knowing that it would be disrespectful to avert our eyes, that the only gift we have to offer in this moment is our undivided attention.

②

When people sit with a dying person, they know that they are doing more than taking up space in the room. But if you ask them to describe what that “more” is, they have a hard time finding the right words. And when the words come, they are almost always some variant on “I was simply being present.”

practice presence

We learn to “practice presence” when we sit with a dying person—to treat the space between us as sacred, to honor the soul and its destiny. Our honoring may be wordless or perhaps mediated by speech that the dying person cannot hear. Yet this honoring somehow keeps us connected as we bear witness to another’s journey into the ultimate solitude.

I am not privy to reports from the other side, so I do not know what having someone “practicing presence” means to a person who is dying. But I have a hunch that comes from my own experience. When I went into a deadly darkness that I had to walk

alone, the darkness called clinical depression, I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed *their* faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek—quietly bolstering *my* faltering faith that perhaps, in fact, I did.

I do not know, yet, what a dying person experiences. But this I do know: I would sooner die in the company of someone practicing simple presence than I would die alone. And I know this as well: we are all dying, all the time. So why wait for the last few hours before offering each other our presence? It is a gift we can give and receive right now, in a circle of trust.

Two Solitudes
protect & border & salute each other

No one has described the relationships that characterize a circle of trust more beautifully or more precisely than the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote of "the love that consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other."⁷

① reasons. First, it excludes the violence we sometimes do to each other in love's name. I do not mean the overt, physical violence of an abusive relationship. I mean the subtle violence we do when we violate the other's solitude with the intention of being helpful.

In *Zorba the Greek*, Nikos Kazantzakis tells a tale about the way some efforts to help can do real harm:

One morning . . . I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as the butterfly was making a hole in the case preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle

began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole body to unfold them. Bending over it I tried to help it with my breath. In vain.

It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.

That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.⁸

On rare occasions, we may need to breathe someone into life who is incapacitated in a way that threatens his or her well-being. But most people can and must come to life in their own way and time, and if we try to help them by hastening the process, we end up doing harm. In a circle of trust—as two or more solitudes protect and border and salute each other—we are given the freedom to live our own lives by "the great laws of nature" and to learn how to live them more deeply.

There is a sharper way to put this point: a love that respects the other's solitude offers a hedge against amateur psychotherapy, an abomination that has created many "circles of distrust." A circle of trust is not a therapy group. It is not facilitated by a professional therapist, and its members do not have a therapeutic contract with each other. In an age when therapy is practiced without credentials, competence, or invitation, the image of two solitudes protecting, bordering, and saluting each other can help