

Trusting our Deeper Knowing: On Cataclysms, Contemplation, and Circles of Trust

Parker J. Palmer PhD

On October 10–12, 2008, Marcy Jackson and I (supported by our colleagues, Rick Jackson and Ann New), led a Circle of Trust retreat at the Fetzer Institute for fifteen people from the worlds of big business, financial services and philanthropy—many of them closely tied to Wall Street and all of them devoted to the common good. Our retreat began just one day after the Dow Jones had fallen nearly 40% below its record high, set only a year earlier.

As the economic and political fabric of American life unravels and reveals its many flaws, with tragic consequences for so many lives, the tag-line the Center has been using for the past few years—“Reclaiming Identity and Integrity in Professional and Public Life”—seems more important than ever. Can Circles of Trust contribute to that reclaiming? The fifteen civic-minded people involved in our October 10-12 retreat would, I believe, say “Yes.” What follows is the context in which we set those three days of listening to the inner teacher in community.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the nineteenth century French scholar famous for *Democracy in America*, wrote a less well-known book titled *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, arguing that the French Revolution happened long before it happened. The eruption that shattered French society at the end of the eighteenth century was the result of small seismic shifts that had been accumulating for decades deep underground. If people had paid attention to the tectonic instabilities caused by greed and injustice, and had responded wisely to the nervous needles on their inner seismographs, the “Reign of Terror” might have been avoided.

A parallel point can be made about the economic terrors that now engulf America: at some level, most of us knew they were coming. Who doesn't know that a society in which the rich get richer while the poor get poorer is a society that will someday have to pay the piper? Who doesn't know that when a relatively small fraction of the world's population uses its power to command and consume a disproportionately large fraction of the world's resources, the chickens will come home to roost? Who doesn't know that an economic system that encourages us to live beyond our means and refuses to regulate greed is one in which our avarice will come back to bite us? Who doesn't know that at

every level of life, from personal to global to cosmic, what goes around comes around?

The problem is not that we don't possess a capacity to know these things. If we didn't, we wouldn't have all the colloquialisms I just used! The problem is that the knowledge we need, like the seismic shifts that create eruptions, originates underground. It comes from a place within us deeper than our intellects, a place the poet William Stafford calls "a remote, important region in all who speak," a place sometimes called the inner teacher or the soul.

But rarely do we allow ourselves to go to that place. Instead, we fill our lives with noisy distractions, blocking our access to insights that might scare us but could also save us. The purpose of an authentic "inner life" retreat is not to flee from a frightening world, but to give ourselves access to those deeper sources of knowing that can help us find our way through what we fear.

A story about Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and writer, provides a case in point. In 1944, Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, a walled monastery in the Kentucky woods, to live a life of silence and solitude. He had fled from the madness of a war-torn world just as American triumphalism was about to emerge—another form of national madness that may now, in the fall of 2008, have run its course for a while. For the next few years Merton pursued a "spirituality of flight," and in 1949 published a rather pious book called *Seeds of Contemplation*.

But as Merton went deeper within himself and touched the collective consciousness, he began to "read" the rumblings of injustice under the surface of a fat, happy and deluded white America. He listened, really listened, to African American music, especially jazz and the blues. He corresponded with discerning friends who served as "listening posts" in the larger world. He read poetry and literary classics as well as social criticism. He examined his own conscience as a privileged white American male. And, through contemplation and prayer, he went to a place where language and sound cannot take us, a place within ourselves and our world where truth has a chance to come clear and the norms of love and justice coincide.

Fifteen years later, in 1964, Merton published *Seeds of Destruction* in which he prophesied "the fire next time," a conflagration of the races rooted in white ignorance, indifference and injustice. The book lost him a lot of readers who had loved his earlier piety. And he was taken to task, in print, by a well-

known writer and urban activist who said, in effect, “How dare a cloistered monk, writing from behind gated walls in the Kentucky woods, pretend to know more about race in America than we who are out on the front lines extinguishing ‘the fire next time’?”

Three years later, in 1967, Merton’s critic wrote an open letter to Merton in *The National Catholic Reporter*, apologizing “for having put down *Seeds of Destruction*. With most of the summer of 1967 past, he said, we can now ‘see that you were correct.’...At the time [I published my criticism] you seemed to be trying to be a white James Baldwin. Now it seems to me that you were ‘telling it as it is’ and maybe ‘as it will be.’” (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 55.)

Neither Merton nor his critic would want us to withdraw from the action. But both would agree that activism ungrounded in contemplation can lead to ego-induced blindness, shutting down those soul-deep sources of knowing that open us to larger truth.

Merton thanked his critic in writing, then took his case one step further. White liberals, he wrote, would not be up to the task of healing a racially divided nation. We would need “a new politics in this country” in order to come anywhere near that goal. Maybe, just maybe, we are seeing the seeds of that new politics today—fifty years after Merton got it right, once again, from his “still point” out in the woods.

What does all this have to do with circles of trust? Take Tocqueville’s insight about the subterranean causes of the French Revolution, fold in all those colloquialisms about “chickens coming home to roost,” and blend them with the Merton story: circles of trust give us a chance us to tap our deeper sources of knowing so we can see more clearly what is, what is coming and how we might find our way through, led by the soul as we go. In such circles we create a space that encourages inner discernment, while at the same time creating relationships that can support and sustain “right action” based on what we learn from within.

But there is, of course, a “rub” to all this in our culture of greed: listening to your inner teacher may make you a prophet but it is not likely to make you a profit. Reclaiming identity and integrity in personal and public life may make you a person who evokes the better angels of our nature, but it will not

improve your “bottom line”—at least not in the understanding of that phrase that has landed us in so much trouble.

Take, for example, the companies that banks hire to identify people on the verge of foreclosure, people so desperate to salvage their homes that they can be conned into signing up for yet another mortgage scam. Who cares about destroying these families’ finances, along with the credit market itself, as long as the scammers’ bottom lines improve?

Apparently not Allen E. Geller, CEO of Visions Marketing Services in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who was quoted as saying that the people his company called “were astounded. They said, ‘I can’t believe you just called me. How did you know we were just getting ready to [refinance our home]?’ We [who were making these calls] were just sitting back laughing.” (“The Debt Trap: Banks Mine Data and Woo Troubled Borrowers,” *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 2008, p. B1)

Vision Marketing Services has a “vision” that would terrify Dante. The fact that causing suffering makes them laugh makes me all the more grateful for the life-giving spirits of the business and financial leaders who showed up so fully for our October 10–12 Circle of Trust retreat. I know that there are many more of their kind out there, and we have much to learn from them.

The people in that circle told us that the retreat helped them recommit to integrity amid the piracy of the marketplace. Here is the testimony of one of them, the CEO of a very large publicly-traded corporation. His words, and what I know of his life and work, help me take heart. And they remind me why the mission of the Center for Courage & Renewal is important: creating trustworthy spaces where people can hear and follow the voice of their deeper knowing—the voice one can hear so clearly in these words—is work worth doing:

Arriving at the retreat, my heart was agitated. As I leave, it is still. Arriving at the retreat, I was blaming. As I leave, I am accepting responsibility. Arriving at the retreat, I was angry. As I leave, I have a sense of peace. Arriving at the retreat, I was focused on my own distress. As I leave, I am seeing beyond myself again. Arriving at the retreat, I was running from my pain. As I leave, I am allowing it to live in me. Arriving at the retreat, my angst was palpable. As I leave, I have hope about the present and the future.