

**Wisdom Circle – Release/Intro to Small Groups
October 2015**

PREPARATION

Words of Wisdom

What is a circle of trust? It is the kind of carefully created space that invites the soul to make itself known. The kind of space where we can practice the paradox of “being alone together,” a space that welcomes our inwardness even as it connects us to the gifts and challenges of community, and to the larger world.

~Parker J. Palmer, [A Hidden Wholeness](#)

There is a quality of listening that is possible among a circle of human beings, who by their attentiveness to one another create a space in which each person is able to give voice to the truth of his or her life. There is the miracle of authentic narrative, made possible by listening that holds still long enough to let the truth be told. Where there is this kind of listening and speaking, a new kind of community is born – a community of life

~adapted from [Proverbs of Ashes](#), by Rebecca Parker

I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place.

~Rufus Jones, Quaker historian and theologian

The basic form of council creates the framework for attentive listening, because the option to interrupt has been removed. But that’s only the first step. Ultimately, developing the ability to listen devoutly in council depends on training the whole body to listen more consciously through the practice of “persistent self-witnessing.”

~The Way of Council

Covenant groups are a transformational practice through which we, with others, can discover our own underlying assumptions about reality and examine our ways of being, some of which have become so habitual that they seem to us just ‘the way things are.’ The practice of Small Group Ministry does ask us to suspend judgment long enough to hear respectfully the understandings of others even those vastly different from our own.

~Robert Hill, [The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten At a Time](#)

Behind every vision and ministry program – and small group program – is a broken heart. This is what gives human efforts their passion and focus—their reason for being.

~from “Soul Matters,” by Scott Taylor

Spiritual Exercise –

This month's transformational theme is "Release." If you are returning to a small group, take some time before its first meeting to reflect on whether there is anything that you are holding onto from previous meetings that might get in the way of your being able to fully share, fully listen with an open heart when the group re-convenes. Perhaps it was something someone said that made you uncomfortable...a conflict that wasn't fully resolved...a time when you felt unheard, or when the group covenant was broken. If you are about to join a small group for the first time, reflecting on whether you've had past experiences in other kinds of groups that you are holding onto. Take some time to let these memories sit in your mind, without judging them. Pay attention to your breathing and to the feelings in your body. And as you feel ready, release them.

Questions for Reflection:

- When was a time in your life in which you felt deeply heard?
- What memories, assumptions, or habits regarding being in groups would you like to release in order to participate more openly and deeply in this small group?
- How do you respond to Parker Palmer's idea that we each have an inner teacher?

Reading:

"The Soul is Shy: A Vision of What Small Groups Can Be "
Parker J. Palmer, "A Hidden Wholeness"

So what do we do in a circle of trust? We speak our own truth; we listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter... Our purpose is not to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a chance to teach us.

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 a communal setting. 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. In a circle of trust, formation flows from the belief that 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 quite different from 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 ever can.

Wisdom Circle – Release Session Plan

This session plan is a suggested guide, not a rigid set of rules. You may adapt the guide with your own openings, closings, and wording as you feel is appropriate in your group. All the times are estimates. You should adjust the timing depending on the size of your group.

Gathering & Welcome (~5 min)

Chalice Lighting (~2 min)

Optional Chalice Reading:

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations,
And inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.
May we know once again that we are not isolated beings,
But connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe,
To this community and to each other.

#434 in Singing the Living Tradition, by Anonymous

Check-In (~20-30 minutes)

As you feel comfortable, take 2-3 minutes to share one thing that is lifting your spirits, and one thing that is weighing you down. This is a time for sharing, but not for discussion.

Business (~10 minutes)

Use this time for any new business: Welcoming new members; Scheduling future meetings; Revisiting the Covenant; Answering questions about Wisdom Circle processes; Etc...

Discussion (~60 minutes)

Introduce Topic. Take Turns Reading aloud the “Words of Wisdom.”

- When was a time in your life in which you felt deeply heard?
- What memories, assumptions, or habits regarding being in groups would you like to release in order to participate more openly and deeply in this small group?
- How do you respond to Parker Palmer’s idea that we each have an inner teacher?

Silent Reflection (~2 minutes)

First Responses (Share in the order you feel moved)

Cross-Conversation (Ask questions that invite deeper reflection; Speak from personal experience, and use “I statements”; Avoid explaining or judging)

Final Thoughts (Share in the order you feel moved)

Gratitude (~5-10 minutes)

Share 1-2 things that have been meaningful to you from this session.

Closing

Optional Chalice Extinguishing Song:

“From You I Receive” (Sing 3-5 times. If your group feels up to it, you can sing it in a round.)

*From you I receive,
To you I give,
Together we share,
And from this we live.*

(#402 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

(YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7a0Lei2OCA>)

402 From You I Receive

The musical score is written in 3/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 120. The melody is on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The lyrics are: "From you I re-ceive, to you I give, to- geth- er we share, and from this we live." The chords are: F, Bb, C, F, Dm, Gm, C7, F.

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RABBI
Irregular